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by Saki

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mystery magazine

October, 1982

HUNT A COLD TRAIL

by Jeffry Scott

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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

This October issue of AHMM is by way of being a special Halloween issue. In the pages that follow, you'll find mystery mixed with ghostly peregrinations, a batch of disguises, one real live family curse, and one real live witch. It all adds up, we think, to a collection appropriate to the season, topped off by Saki's eerie little tale.

Despite the exotic sound of his name, "Saki" was really H. H. Munro, of Scottish descent, born in Burma, brought up in Devon, reporter, short story writer, and chronicler—delightfully—of the spirit of his times, who died in World War I in France at the age of forty-five. The "H. H." stands for Hector and Hugh; the "Saki" came from *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyám* and is the name of the cup-bearer. Saki wrote many short stories (all of them very brief): lighthearted, witty tales of upper-class life in Edwardian England as revealed through the adventures of his aristocratic young heroes, Reginald and Clovis especially, and chill-

ing little presentations of evil doings, sometimes with a touch of the horror story. Christopher Morley said of him, "Aunts and werewolves were two of his specialties." The present story has neither, as it happens, but it evokes mystery as few stories of any kind can do.

In September, because we wanted to bring you the list of Edgar winners and nominees, we didn't have space to welcome back Ron Butler, whose story "A Matter of Chances" appeared in that issue. But we have another story—and another opportunity—this time, with the appearance in this issue of "The Village Crime." Dr. Butler had taken some time off from story writing while he was in Japan for an extended stay, but he's back at his typewriter again, and we're glad to say that there are more stories upcoming. He is an anthropologist specializing in fossil bones, as well as a writer, as we mentioned in response to a letter in August; he began to concentrate on the latter field in Japan in the 1970's when, while



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teaching there, he was asked to write some stories to help out students of English. He is the father of four daughters, one of them brand-new. (Which reminds us that Noriko is expecting. Watch for "Inspector Ueki's Day" in the December issue; it's just possible that . . .)

Alan Ryan, author of "The Witch, the Child, and the U.P.S. Fellow," is new to our pages, but he has been writing stories since 1978, principally in the fields of fantasy, horror, and science fiction. He has also taught English and drama, has written book reviews for the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Washington Post*, has written a novel, *Panther!*, published in 1981 by NAL/Signet, and has another novel and an anthology coming out this fall.

Jeffrey Scott, author of our cover story, "Hunt a Cold Trail," has been writing for AHMM since 1976 (this is his 30th story

for us), and has produced some two hundred short stories altogether. He began with a fantasy called "Fisgard's Dragon" in 1962 and has had his stories in nine of the British Crime Writers' Association's yearly anthologies. He has also written an espionage novel, *Trust Them and Die*. In between, he is a reporter in England for a national newspaper.

Davis Publications, Inc., publishers of AHMM and a number of other magazines, is currently celebrating its 25th Birthday (some birthdays are nice). It's a particular pleasure for all of us here to have achieved such an illustrious date in the company of such fine writers as those mentioned above and all the others whose stories we've had the honor of printing. Not to mention in the company of our excellent readers! Our thanks to all of you, and to all of them, for being such first-rate company along the way.

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HUNTA COLD TRAIL

by Jeffry
Scott

LONDON, 1942
Death in Darkness

It happened every time night fell, his feeling of impotent anger and his sense of rejection by something familiar. Streets known since childhood turned into sable labyrinths.

The sky, arched like an invisible, downturned bowl, became a black arena of prowling, hurtling violence against blind ants scurrying beneath it. Mr. Lionel Greer, who wrote thrillers while being certain that he was a popular novelist—not at *all* the same—was thoroughly dis-

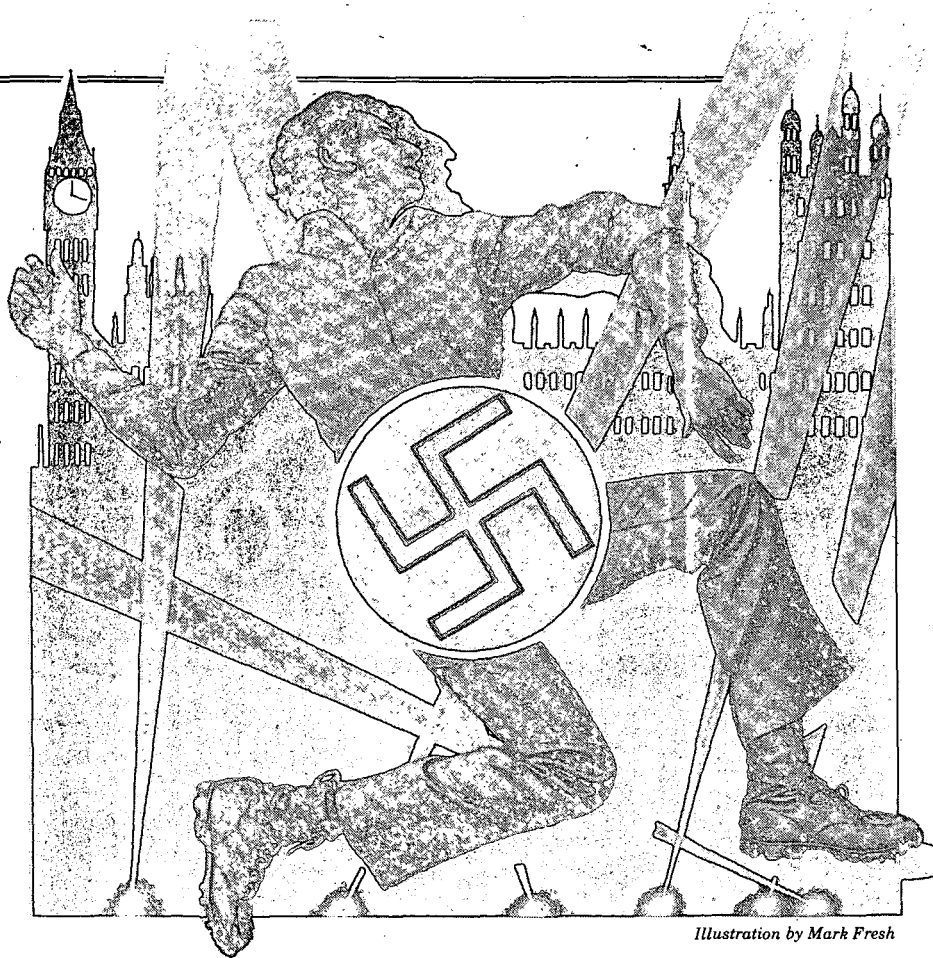


Illustration by Mark Fresh

composed. But to do him justice, old Greer was no more afraid than any sane person ought to be.

For years he had basked in the good fortune of being himself, a chap he approved of and indeed warmly admired. And then World War Two had bro-

ken out, making eminent authors somehow irrelevant. High overhead in the embattled London darkness flew sundry young strangers intent on ending his life by means of high explosives . . . *and they didn't know Lionel Greer from a hole in the ground.*

Which was where his shattered remains could well be reposing before the night was out, Greer reflected grimly. In which case, the shortage of newsprint and the radically altered scales of fame and importance would doom him to a grudging brace of sentences in the *Times* by way of an obituary.

"Damn," Mr. Greer muttered.

Colonel Freddy, heel-rapping along beside him, misread the outburst. "We are all soldiers now, my friend, and must do our duty." The effort of speaking English without an accent, while successful, made Colonel Arnulf Feodor's voice as metallic as a robot's. "Bloody foreigners," Lionel Greer thought. They would keep putting into words what every right-thinking Briton believed, yet would rather die than utter. Of course civilians were in the front line, of course Mr. Greer would gladly take his life in his hands to advance the war effort by as little as the thickness of a hair. But it was tiresome to be lectured on the fact.

Over towards the park, searchlight beams crossed and probed, looking like the stilts of invisible giants dancing clumsily in the upper air. Although the sirens had howled the alert, Greer could hear only one aircraft, a peevish, inimit-

able nagging noise. The Luftwaffe did not synchronize their twin engines: not just an evil and menacing racket came from them but an *untidy* one, Lionel Greer decided.

Strangely, that heartened him, and he walked a little faster, banging his shoulder on a lamp post and swearing again.

Colonel Freddy's steely little fingers locked on his bicep. "More haste, less speed." Feodor was always producing such British proverbs, with the pride of a scholar rolling out some obscure Latin tag.

Mr. Greer managed to laugh pleasantly. "That's the ticket, Freddy. All the time in the world, eh? Anyway, I dare say poor old Charlie's in no hurry to start our powwow."

Lionel Greer might have written the most appalling tosh about intrigue in the courts of Europe, about notables in domino masks, about white shoulders distracting clean-cut young Britons from glimpsing drugs being slipped into goblets of champagne, but he wasn't a fool. Between the wars he had travelled widely, and as a minor member of an aristocratic clan, with the ear of certain press barons for whom he wrote the occasional leader-page essay, Lionel Greer had learned and seen rather more than the average tourist. So now that

Hitler was lording it over Europe and London was sanctuary and power base for motley governments in exile, Mr. Greer had work to do. Officially with the Ministry of Information, his true role was to act as liaison between lesser political emigré groups and Whitehall.

"Dr. Charlus has no option but waiting," Colonel Freddy retorted stiffly. "And he is not in the least poor, any more. After losing everything in '39, like the rest of us, he is affluent again, yes? It is a prime point against him."

A sense of humor wasn't among the colonel's assets; he took things literally. Even in the presence of sudden death, it cheered Lionel Greer wonderfully to be one up on the sinister little prig.

Where on earth were they, though? London without illumination was a maze. He and Colonel Freddy had dined in Soho and had been stumbling through darkness for some five minutes. Feodor had arranged the meeting at an address on the far side of Trafalgar Square, about half a mile from the restaurant.

Typical, Greer told himself crossly. The duchy's exiled cabinet had perfectly good quarters at its embassy in Mayfair. Colonel Feodor, holding the portfolios of Defense, Intelli-

gence, and for some bizarre reason, Railways and Communications, was just across the corridor from Dr. Udo Charlus, who was in charge of . . . Mr. Greer sighed, his expression wry. In charge of pretty well everything else.

Colonel Freddy could have made his accusation and extracted the confession just by taking ten steps from his desk. But no, the last drop of melodrama had to be squeezed from the event. "Not the embassy, on any account," Feodor had insisted that morning. "It is not secure, the Bolsheviks are everywhere."

Lionel Greer sighed again, philosophically, though it turned into a wince as distant, brutal crashes rolled across rooftops from the dockland area. There must be more than one German bomber about.

If one wanted to overstate absurdly the duchy's calibre in world affairs, then it had minimal weight and importance. Naturally, its politicians tended to make a fuss over everything. The duchy had been one of those pocket states, a freak nation that could be strolled across in a day, much like Lichtenstein or Monaco although several times larger. Yes, Colonel Freddy had handed his hosts a tiny network of stayback agents who might provide useful infor-

mation on troop movements, plus a dubiously-valid contact in the Nazi high command. The fleeing cabinet had brought not just themselves but the duchy's stock of industrial diamonds and gold reserves of a million pounds or so, when boarding the Royal Navy destroyer. Yet the hard fact was that the Germans had invaded and seized the duchy out of an impulse for Teutonic tidiness on the map. They didn't care a straw about the escape of Archduke Francis-Harold, Dr. Charlus, Colonel Freddy, and the rest.

"Take cover!" a harsh voice yelled. "Get off the interesting-adjective street, you silly old bleeders!" An air raid warden, steel helmet tilted jauntily, had pounced out of an alley.

"Official business," Mr. Greer snapped, before Colonel Freddy could erupt. He was awfully good at that.

The warden came closer, peering through the murk. Mr. Greer patiently displayed his documents. "Where are we, exactly?" he demanded.

"Bottom of Haymarket. Turn left and keep going and you'll be in Traff Square." The warden stepped back. "Official business? Fancy dress party, more like." Then he vanished. And the sounds of falling bombs were closer now.

Mr. Greer blushed. The

blackout was a nuisance, but at least it kept Colonel Freddy secure from all but occasional exposure to the mirth of louts. The duchy's army hadn't been large, but the package was gorgeous. Colonel Feodor lived in the dress uniform of the Hussars: skin-tight black cavalry overalls with a silver stripe on the pants, bottle-green cape lined in crimson, and a livid yellow kepi with a patent leather brim.

Under his arm, instead of a riding crop or swagger cane, the colonel kept a dandy's walking stick, a toy affair of cloudy malacca hardly a foot long, with an ivory crane's head as a handle and an ornate red silk cord that clashed with the cape's lining. Mr. Greer felt sure that wasn't regulation; he was equally sure that Colonel Freddy thought it added exactly the right touch to his garb.

"Do we have to go through with this?" he asked, not for the first time, as they stumbled on. And won a suspicious look from Feodor. Colonel Freddy seemed more Thai than Central European—broad cheeks, liquidly eloquent eyes, a button nose, and a wide, lipless mouth.

"Oh, action must be taken," Greer added hastily. "But I have no official standing, you know. There are channels for all this sort of thing."

"Nevertheless, you are my

witness, my honest broker, my man of goodwill," Feodor told him. "There has been treachery, treason, betrayal. It cannot continue. However, for the sake of my poor country's honor, I wish the snake to be ground underfoot quietly, without scandal."

More melodrama, Mr. Greer mused, uncomfortably aware that it was much the same brand that, in his books, did rather well.

A growing thunder of anti-aircraft batteries around the capital—whose shrapnel would hit far more homes on the way down than bombers in the air, but at least they boosted morale—made him ashamed of frivolous reservations. Treachery was no light matter.

Cabinet ministers, even of tiny states, did get to hear things. Somebody was passing information to the Germans, suspicion had fallen on the duchy's government in exile, and now Colonel Feodor was accusing Dr. Charlus.

Mr. Greer liked Charlus, a florid, rather pathetic hulk who had been a playboy in the thirties and was in the duchy's cabinet through his business and economic expertise. Charlus wasn't up to it and had been going to pieces for months. But an agent for Berlin? Lionel Greer found it hard to credit,

though Colonel Freddy had assembled a convincing if circumstantial case. Regular payments were being made into Udo Charlus's Swiss bank account. One of his mistresses—he went in for them in the plural—visited Lisbon far too often for comfort, and he was among half a dozen men privy to an official secret that had leaked. . . .

Greer sensed as much as saw the Landseer lions and Nelson's Column as the two men groped around the edge of Trafalgar Square. "Charlus keeps rooms in Neptune Court," Colonel Freddy explained. "We are supposed to live in embassy quarters. It aids security and efficiency, and one cannot keep bankers' hours in wartime. But not the odious Charlus, he sneaks away, the better to pursue his sordid sexual intrigues."

Where does he get these expressions? Mr. Greer wondered irritably. At least they were near Neptune Court, which he recalled as a cul-de-sac full of derelict stores.

Colonel Freddy had lit a cigar, and it glowed luridly every dozen steps or so. Greer thought better of him. Freddy wasn't enjoying this; he just intended to see justice done, without gloating. For he was a connoisseur of cigars who could be a

great bore about the things. He'd told an uncaring Mr. Greer, many times, that only a barbarian would smoke a cigar on the hoof, as it were, like a common cigarette. A Havana, Colonel Freddy maintained, offered one of life's supreme sensual experiences. It was a privilege to be savored at leisure.

Evidently his nerves craved nicotine at this moment, strongly enough to turn the fastidious little martinet into a temporary barbarian. Mr. Greer filed the observation away for use in his next book; it was exactly the type of sophisticated, worldly aside that his snobbish readers might relish.

A policeman, steel-helmeted like the warden, bulked at the corner. Again they had to produce identity cards and passes. "You'd better look slippy, gentlemen, even if it is official business," said the bobby. "The raid seems to be moving this way." And he saluted as the darkness claimed him.

Neptune Court turned out to be a trench of blackness near the Temple underground station.

Colonel Freddy swung aside for a moment into a doorway; a match scraped and flared. "Cigar went out. Forward march," he said. "It's the third building on the left."

But he contradicted himself a stride or two later, stopping dead. "Number 5, this is Charlus's den." He pressed the doorbell.

Mr. Greer was remembering Neptune Court in peacetime. There'd been an antiquarian bookseller—Austrian, long since interned—a place selling model ships and cars, and . . . yes, a dancing school. Vivid in his mind, for an instant, was the picture of a sunny afternoon, and a knot of little girls with ballet shoes dangling from their hands, being collected by nannies and shepherded away to cars parked on the Embankment. For no good reason, his eyes prickled. Damn and blast Adolf Hitler and all his works!

Ironically, amid the noise of the air raid and the confusing darkness, the smaller noise registered perfectly, making Lionel Greer start and cry out. Colonel Freddy stiffened. "Pistol shot. You agree?"

"Yes," Greer stammered. "I think so." Melodrama was still with them, he thought. Charlus cornered and desperate, aware of Feodor's enmity, taking "The Only Way Out."

Feodor unsnapped the patent-leather holster at his hip and passed Mr. Greer an ugly little self-loading pistol. "Take this and be ready." He tried the door's handle and the door

swung inwards, obviously unlocked and left ajar.

Shutting it behind them, the colonel produced a torch whose beam was narrow as a rapier blade. Uncarpeted stairs rose directly before them between blank walls, their paper starting to bubble and peel. Colonel Freddy clattered up to the landing, Greer puffing behind, trying to recall which way to snick the safety catch before squeezing the trigger. Like a lot of ex-soldiers, he profoundly distrusted handguns.

The stairs went no higher, this was a two-floor building. And there was just one door ahead. The rapier pricked a visiting card pinned on it. Ornate script, *Dr. Udo Charlus*.

Colonel Freddy wrenched at the handle, rattled it, pushed unavailingly as he shouted Charlus's name. "Locked, but not for long." He was enjoying himself after all. He stood back and smashed a glossy boot against the wood, just beneath the doorknob.

They jostled briefly in the opening as the lock was sprung and the flimsy barrier flew open, its hinges emitting a batlike squeak. Colonel Freddy's torch lanced around, flicking and feinting at the walls, lingering momentarily on a pair of dark fabric squares on the wall opposite the doors. "The windows

are well curtained, now where is the light switch? Ah . . ."

Pale orange radiance filled the room from a trio of unshaded bulbs dangling from the ceiling, making Lionel Greer shade his eyes.

The space was surprisingly long and narrow and at first glance, empty. The bareness puzzled him until he saw the waist-high barre along one wall, and the tall mirrors. This must have been the dancing school; the maplewood floor, sadly smeared and dusty now, confirmed his guess. So did a pale oblong, diagonally set in a corner, where the piano had stood.

Then with a twinge of dread and nausea, he understood that the room was not empty after all. Flourishing his absurd cane, Colonel Freddy raced to the far end. "Charlus, what's the meaning of—my god!" Feodor turned sharply, aiming the cane like a gun. "Stay in the doorway! Is anyone else in here?"

"Don't be damned silly. Sorry . . . no, there's nobody else."

"And nobody could have slipped past us on the stairs. Very well." The Colonel's baffled, almost frightened tone suggested otherwise.

Reluctantly Mr. Greer quit his post and trudged to join the other man. His shoes made less noise than Colonel Freddy's

boots had done, yet they were far too loud for his taste.

Dr. Udo Charlus sat on the only remaining piece of furniture in the room, a cheap folding chair. The knuckles of his left hand touched the floor as he sprawled to one side as if picked up and flung onto that flimsy perch.

His mouth and eyes were open, and above and between the furry brows, a fat worm of blood was wriggling out of its black burrow.

Colonel Freddy giggled, brief, sudden, shrill. Then the mask went back in place. "He was shot a matter of seconds ago, a minute at most, when we heard that pistol go off."

Hair rising, Mr. Greer spun round. But the room was still empty.

"Wait, we must be methodical, logical." Colonel Freddy twitched his pistol from Greer's hand. "Observe, I work the slide, so, and eject the magazine. All cartridges unfired. Sniff the muzzle, please."

Lionel Greer recoiled. "It hasn't been fired. I've had it since we came in!"

"Just so, but it is better to establish such points as soon as possible. You have no other firearm?"

Mr. Greer, one eye on the corpse, didn't like this at all. "No. But—"

"A routine enquiry, as your police say." The colonel raised his arms like wings and twirled round, making the cape swirl. "And I have no concealed weapons."

"Look here, neither of us killed the poor wretch. While we go through this pantomime, the real culprit's running like hell," Greer protested.

"Run where, and *from* where? The door was locked, the room empty, remember."

"You mean Charlie shot himself?"

"Hardly." Colonel Freddy was sardonic. He knelt beside the dead man, ignoring Greer's distaste, and deftly searched the corpse's pocket. "No pistol," the colonel reported laconically.

"It's impossible! *The windows . . . ?*"

Mr. Greer dashed over to them and wrenched at the heavy blankets nailed to the frames in accordance with blackout regulations that forbade the smallest chink of light to spill from indoors. Colonel Freddy scurried to the doorway and switched the lights off.

There was some light outside now, diffused, lurid redness from distant fires reflected off low clouds. Enough to prove that the two large, oblong windows, while grimy, were unbroken.

Mr. Greer struggled to raise the lower half of each sash or

force down the tops, without avail. Colonel Freddy risked a swift use of his tight-beamed torch to inspect the catches. Mr. Greer saw that they were not only in place, firmly holding the windows shut, but rusted there. He would have bet his life that they had not been opened in years.

His voice shook. "We'd better get the police."

Feodor nodded and led the way out. "I wish them joy of this affair, my friend." He flicked the torch on and off, long enough to reveal an iron key on the inside of the door. "Dr. Charlus locked himself away in here and a phantom shot him to death."

"There must be something, a trapdoor, a, a . . ."

"Secret passage?" Colonel Freddy suggested politely. They both knew it had not been that sort of room.

Colonel Freddy fiddled with the front door catch, slammed it, and grunted with satisfaction. "Secure until Scotland Yard arrives."

As they emerged into Neptune Court, there were three long, eerie whistles.

"Get down," Mr. Greer exclaimed, flinging himself flat. Those whistles came from the fins of falling bombs, ones that would land close by. The flagstones rose under him and

rapped him painfully on knee and hip.

There was a huge explosion and an echo, or perhaps two explosions within split seconds of each other.

Colonel Freddy helped him up, mouthing at him. Mr. Greer was deafened and half stunned. Suddenly Neptune Court was full of goldfish, leaping and dancing, stranded on dry ground and desperate for water. With something close to awe, Lionel Greer recognized them for machine-gun cartridge cases spewed from some German bomber or RAF night fighter, thousands of feet above in the blackness. It was all quite mad.

They ran, and were back in Trafalgar Square before the stitch in Mr. Greer's side made him sink to one knee, retching and gasping.

His hearing had returned. There were more people on the streets, vehicles racing about with headlamps showing narrow slots of yellow, fire engine bells pealing. Colonel Freddy, so pale that the bone of his nose showed as a mauvish blade, chuckled breathlessly. "I have heard of a body vanishing, but never the entire scene of the crime."

Lionel Greer gaped at him.

"Neptune Court must be rubble by now, with Charlus beneath the debris," Feodor

pointed out impatiently. "Lucky that we examined the place thoroughly. That was murder, my friend, a supremely clever murder."

He was about to say more. Instead, he frowned and cocked his head on one side, as if arrested by an invisible companion. He clutched his chest and fell backwards, toy cane bouncing one way, kepi another.

By the time Mr. Greer was able to stop a passing ambulance, Colonel Feodor was dead. "I'm no sawbones," the driver told Greer, drawing a blanket over the contorted face, "but seems to me the bloke's ticker gave out. We're getting a lot of heart attacks, with this bloody blitz."

That was a diagnosis confirmed at the post-mortem.

Mr. Greer submitted two reports to the authorities, one verbal and another written. He was told, in so many words, to keep his mouth shut thereafter. A one-armed major in civilian clothes explained. "Quite frankly, old boy, we don't care whether Charlus was bumped off by a minute amount of curare poison injected under his left big toenail or shot by a ghost or liquidated by Martians.

"The fact is that he died

in a house levelled during an air raid. As far as we're concerned, he's just another victim of the Hun."

"I see no pretext for levity," Mr. Greer began.

"Now you're on the right wavelength," the maimed veteran struck in. "You saw nothing, that's splendid. Least said, soonest mended. The leak's stopped, we needn't offend our friends in the duchy by executing one of their top bods as a spy. Get the idea?"

Naturally, Mr. Greer was not satisfied. He went home to Wimbledon that evening, started his exquisite longhand flowing across the lined pages of an exercise book, and at dawn, laid the fountain pen aside and gingerly flexed his cramped fingers.

It was all there now, not an official report doomed to be destroyed or kept secret, but a workmanlike and—he could be immodest in private—decidedly stylish account of the death of Dr. Udo Charlus and the last hours of Colonel Feodor. He had captured the terror of the night, the giants' skittle alley feeling of the raid and its aftermath, the obscene ugliness of the worm peeping out of Charlus's broad forehead, the evil impossibility of the room with no way out—from which a killer had walked, invisibly.

The chapter did not feature in his war biography, *Bus to the Battlefront*, but it managed to delay the biography's appearance in 1950, while the original edition was pulped. Somebody had had a sight of a review copy of that original edition, the publisher got a warning, and Mr. Greer was called to Whitehall for a nasty seminar on the Official Secrets Act.

The languid boy in the Foreign Office said, "You signed it in October, 1939, Greer. You made a pledge, entered into an agreement. Passage of time is immaterial, I'm afraid. You can't just change your mind about these things."

Mr. Greer explained, argued, wheedled. He was very fond and proud of that chapter. He'd been polishing though not—for he was a rigidly truthful fellow—embroidering it, for years.

The F.O. man frowned and grew snappish. "The good Dr. Charlus, or the wicked Dr. Charlus if you will, died as a result of enemy action, and that's an end of it!"

On the last point he was hopelessly wrong. But Mr. Greer, nourishing a sense of bafflement and grievance into his dotage, was long in his grave before that fact became clear.

LONDON, 1982
Unsolved for Forty Years

Tom Chatto was stripping a motorcycle engine when Sir Gyles Arnolfi peered into the doorway of the shed in Ropewalk Yard, Southwark. Chatto's wild hair nearly brushed the shed's roof, which was a scant six and a half feet from the floor, and in his huge fingers the crankshaft looked like a trinket for a Victorian gentleman's watch chain.

"Here's a pretty occupation for a historian," Sir Gyles observed.

"I'm not a historian," Chatto rumbled repressively. "I'm a junk dealer who writes the odd piece about stuff he runs across from time to time." Putting the crankshaft aside, Chatto finger-combed his untidy black beard. "Very odd, some of 'em," he admitted good-naturedly.

Skeletally elegant and worryingly old, Sir Gyles Arnolfi beamed up at him. "Such modesty! Yet behind it is a central node of vanity making you constitutionally unfit to resist a challenge. And it is on that I'm counting, dear boy."

Tom Chatto resignedly led the way to his store—they went in by the back door—turned the card sign in the street window to read CLOSED instead of OPEN, and set a kettle on the gas ring

behind the counter.

"I'm not working for you," he warned.

Sir Gyles, enthroned on a bentwood chair in a clearing between vintage fairground peepshow machines and automata supporting boxes of postcards, incipient avalanches of books, and dangerously tall pillars of 78 records, nodded off-handedly. One expected to hear parchment creak.

"You must lose a lot through pilfering, leaving the shop unattended while you tinker at the back."

Pouring scalding water into the teapot, the big man chuckled abruptly. Arnolfi started as the sound triggered a thump and a scrape somewhere behind the piled goods, and a panting whimper.

"My assistant watches the store. A German shepherd, well, mainly; don't know the rest of his breeding but it's bad tempered," Tom Chatto explained. "What's on your mind? You didn't come slumming just to discuss my security."

Arnolfi smiled meaninglessly. His *Who's Who* entry was a masterwork of compression and misdirection. Hardly anyone knew him well, or even at all. Among those who did, some swore that he was the immoral black sheep of a merchant banking family, others

were certain that he had been something in the Diplomatic, and a few believed him to be a millionaire who'd made his pile, not necessarily shadily, in the thirties. All were correct, to some extent.

"It's more a matter of what will be on your mind shortly, Thomas. I make no pleas to your public spirit or patriotism . . ."

"Just as well," Chatto snorted. He came over with Arnolfi's mug of tea, his limp hardly noticeable because such a large, bearlike person's gait was likely to be rolling. As a young intelligence officer he had taken two Russian bullets in the thigh. He considered his dues paid.

Sir Gyles sipped placidly. "Nor do I appeal to your greed by mentioning money, since you're one of that rare tribe who generally has enough, be it ever so little.

"I merely offer you a gem, a treasure, here for the taking." Putting the mug down, Arnolfi made his buffed fingernails semaphore as he ticked points off in the air.

"It's a locked room mystery, Thomas. Unsolved for forty years, almost to the day."

"Sealed room," Chatto corrected under his breath. But his eyes were bright, his attention captured.

"It's a common device in sen-

sational fiction for the body to vanish immediately after discovery," Sir Gyles continued, "but in this instance, all the physical evidence, not to mention the scene of the crime, vanished as well." He paused artfully to drink more tea. "Was there anything else? Oh yes, the sole witness must have got it wrong somehow—but he was an observer of sorts, and a truthful man."

Chatto pulled a face and tugged his beard. "You're an old devil! All right, you've got me. Let's see . . . forty years ago, scene of crime vanishes. You just put that in to gild the lily, it's staring-simple, the house or whatever was demolished in an air raid."

Arnolfi wasn't impressed. "The remainder isn't at all simple, my boy. Since you're immersed in that bizarre and ramshackle society of exiled governments in the forties—the French, the Dutch, the Poles, and so forth—I won't insult you by asking if the names Colonel Feodor and Dr. Charlus ring a bell."

"They were with the duchy," Chatto answered promptly. "Died in the same air raid, though not the same place, on the same night. Losing the pair of them made the duchy's cabinet in London look a bit sick. But it was all fairly academic,

because by 1946 the duchy wasn't there any more. It's a few score square miles of Poland today."

"Exactly." Sir Gyles leaned forward in the chair, and for the blink of an eye, he was not a faintly grotesque, impossibly preserved old man, but a stooping hawk. "And in one week from now, a respected Polish official—if that's not a contradiction in terms—will call a press conference to allege that Dr. Charlus was liquidated by the British government, his hosts and protectors, in 1942."

Chatto frowned thoughtfully. "So? It wouldn't be the first such tale. That German playwright in the 1960's accused Churchill of engineering a faked accident that killed General Sikorski, the Polish premier in exile. His play about it ran in the West End for months, and there was a hell of a ruckus. Then it was exposed as a pack of lies, and various interested parties sued the pants off him and everybody connected with the project."

"You miss the point," said Sir Gyles. "To this day, around the world, people believe that smear . . . because they read about it, or saw the play. Several different countries screened television versions or extracts from the London stage production."

"This new canard about Charlus's death, far from being devalued by the previous Big Lie, can only be strengthened by it. No smoke without fire. Millions of people are only too glad to think the worst of the United Kingdom, Thomas; and these days, barring nuclear war and the end of everything, almost the only card we can play in international affairs is the moral one.

"The moral authority of a nation's taking in fugitives in time of war, only to murder those whose political views prove unpalatable—another lie, Charlus's politics didn't matter, a damn, his loyalty was the rub—the moral standing of such hosts is minimal."

For once Arnolfi was unashamedly magisterial, schoolmasterly. "Poland has already snubbed off our protests about martial law there, the throttling of civil rights. They will not be averse to having a stick to beat us with! Who are we to criticize, when we liquidated a respected Polish (or thereabouts) freedom fighter?"

"Point taken," Chatto said lamely, and Sir Gyles Arnolfi became a slightly silly relic again.

Chatto, elaborately casual, asked, "There's nothing at all in this smear campaign, is there?" Because Arnolfi was too

old and wily to jump at shadows, so there had to be something in it.

Sir Gyles was absorbed in the tealeaf pattern at the bottom of his mug.

"That cannot be answered yes or no, dear boy. Very cannily, Admiral Canaris, the German spymaster, recruited great numbers of what might be termed fringe figures, from late 1937 onwards. Hindsight tells us that he had a man in the duchy's cabinet or at least its secretariat.

"By 1942, there were alarming indications that the duchy's party in London was not secure, that information was reaching the Germans. The arrest of a neutral businessman working for us, and an abortive commando raid in 1941 could be laid at the duchy's door.

"It was complex, since all the emigré governments were at least aware of each other and several tried to work in concert. An attack on one, a scandal involving one, would stir up the rest."

Chatto spoke gently. "That's not answering the question."

Sir Gyles met his eyes. "One night after dinner—yes, I was there—Winston blew his top. The duchy's treachery was hardly more than a pinprick, as yet, but one day we'd be invading Europe with the Americans

at our side, and then we could not afford, tolerate, spies within the gate.

"Winston was enraged at the breach of sanctuary. He compared it to a wretched and rat-like fugitive creeping up to the high altar and then covertly honing a dagger to slit the priests' throats. That's more or less a verbatim quotation, by the way. It stirred a relay in his mind; I can see him glowering into the brandy glass and mumbling—it's impossible to convey the tone, self-mocking, half in earnest, a crumpled, elderly schoolboy—mumbling, 'Will no one rid me of this turbulent priest?'"

Arnolfi, turning the empty mug in his dryly fragile claws, returned to the present. "Of course, the turbulent priest could have been any one of thirty or more emigrés from the duchy. As far as we knew then.

"But Dr. Charlus *did* die within the week, and not through enemy action. Sadly, Winston's comment found its way into a diary that was published some years ago. It's all nonsense, naturally, but there is the very faintest line there—if you want to discern it."

Chatto nodded slowly. "After the war, was it proved that Dr. Charlus was the Nazi agent?"

"No. Canaris was dead by then, Hitler had him killed in

the most bestial fashion after the 1944 bomb plot, and the records surviving were fragmentary at best. But the leak did dry up with Charlus's death. And Colonel Feodor, besides his verbal arguments to that ass Lionel Greer, did leave an impressive dossier. Whoever killed Udo Charlus did us a favor."

"Not *the* Lionel Greer, as they say?" Tom Chatto had brightened. "He's unreadable today, bless him, but I devoured his books when I was a kid. All those *Von-und-Zu* aristocrats and deceptively languid Old Etonians with slim automatics in their hip pockets. Ever try sitting on a Browning? Not recommended . . ."

"No doubt." From a dandyish grey suede document case Sir Gyles produced a manila envelope, and a plump exercise book with marbled covers. "This is Greer's formal report—still secret, by the way—and this is his, um, uninhibited version.

"I can't pretend that you're the first consultant we've approached with this material. But they've made no headway with it. You may have more luck."

Tugging his beard again, Chatto objected, "Supposing I do? If the Poles are out to make propaganda, the small matter of the truth—and Lord knows how it could be proved at this

distance of time—isn't likely to daunt them." He cocked an eye at Arnolfi. "Or is it?"

"I'd better explain the background. Charlus had a son, who is now in his fifties and a middle-ranked member of the Polish Communist party, a senior bureaucrat. Charlus Junior's hobby has been to study his father's career—he first came to London in 1956 and has made many visits since.

"Fairly early in the game he suspected that death in the blitz didn't hold water. The exact reasons don't matter too much, they could have pointed either way. One was that the duchy's top men lived at the embassy but Dr. Charlus was supposed to maintain a small apartment to . . . pursue his extra-curricular activities with the opposite sex." Sir Gyles smiled thinly.

"The son inherited Charlus's papers, long since combed for official documents. What he found were mainly old bills and receipts. Young Charlus got very excited because his father's flat was off Baker Street, while he died in a room at Neptune Court, miles away."

Tom Chatto made to interrupt, but Sir Gyles hurried on. "Yes, Charlus could have had two flats, certainly he had many mistresses so it's not unlikely. But there was no documenta-

tion for Neptune Court—the landlord's records were destroyed in another air raid the same year—and young Charlus insisted that his father was low on funds, could have run just the one, um, love nest."

Arnolfi found a silk handkerchief and dabbed his forehead and cheeks. "Charlus Junior went to the Imperial War Museum, the Foreign Office, he went everywhere. As a foreigner, and a Communist at that, he met a brick wall, the death-by-bombing story. It didn't satisfy him.

"Then he read that scrap of Winston's table-talk, an unfortunate jest but it made the wretched fellow seethe with suspicion. And last year, some hack journalist found a draft of Lionel Greer's fuller account of the murder—that book you have now—and published it in an American magazine. Young Charlus saw it, and the fat was in the fire."

"We're on what bookies call a hiding to nothing, it's a no-win situation," Chatto said cheerfully.

"Perhaps not," Sir Gyles contradicted. "Dr. Charlus, energetic fellow, had a daughter as well as a son. Lena Brown married, as her name suggests, an Englishman, and she's lived here most of her life.

"She hotly resents her father's

being accused of treachery and is reluctant to believe that the British government assassinated him. If she can be convinced that we did not, then Mrs. Brown will hold her own press conference, countering her brother's story and threatening legal action against anyone repeating it."

Chatto's brows drew down. "Rubbish. Can't libel a dead man. Anyway, where's the libel in saying he was murdered? Especially since he was, as I understand it."

"Our lawyers believe she could argue that the allegations cast doubt on her own good faith and family feeling. Young Charlus tried to get Lena Brown to join his campaign and she refused. It's a fine point, a delaying tactic, really," the old man admitted.

Eyes half closed, Chatto drawled, "Order, counter-order, disorder, eh? Yes, it would confuse the issue."

Sir Gyles was brisk. "And with threats of libel, the British media at least may regard the whole thing as too hot a potato. *But!*"

And he held up a rigid twig of forefinger. "*But* Lena Brown must be satisfied that Dr. Charlus's death has been explained, past all doubt. Failing that, she will remain silent and her brother's charges must hold the

field and gain maximum circulation. You follow?"

"All I've got to do is crack a 1942 sealed room mystery—"

Arnolfi rose with some difficulty and gathered his document case. "Within the next four days."

LONDON, 1982

Tom Chatto Speaks

Old Arnolfi gave me four days, uttermost, but I went back to him inside twenty-four hours, and most of that was spent reading and re-reading and marvelling over Lionel Greer's manuscript. Putting governments in exile and dark rumors about Churchill and the rest to one side for a moment, the whole outrageous puzzle was about authors.

Lionel Greer, of course, who didn't get things wrong but managed to tell them wrong. And John Dickson Carr, master of the sealed room genre of mystery fiction.

I've never laid strong claims to being extra bright. Carr did all the homework on murder in seemingly impossible circumstances, I just had to fit the Neptune Court business against his three basic versions and discover which fitted.

By Carr's Law, either the

room *isn't* really sealed—in that, for instance, an arrow can be fired through a keyhole without unlocking the door. Or despite appearances, the victim died *after* the seal was broken and witnesses entered the room. Or the man *did* die behind locked doors and secure windows, totally isolated from outsiders . . . Give up? Well, he was dying when he walked in and locked the door behind him.

Incidentally, JDC lays ground rules such as there being no secret passages nor sliding panels. Neptune Court has been rubble for generations, but the archives of the Greater London Council yielded a plan showing it notably deficient in passages, panels, trapdoors, or priest's holes.

The place where Dr. Charlus died was simply a room, and a very inconvenient one at that. Just one means of entry, via the street door and up the stairs. No communication to the lower floor; pupils of the dancing academy had to go into the street and back by another entrance, in order to wash and change after their lessons, using facilities shared with a store leasing that part of the building.

First discrepancy, then . . . Udo Charlus was supposed to have a room as a *pied-à-terre* or, if you like vulgar jokes,

more of a foot in bed. He entertained mistresses there. But Lionel Greer, bless his heart, who kept making the most startling observations without realizing their significance, paints a vivid picture of a cheerless place, empty, bleak, and bare. Little more than an oblong box.

One hates to be coarse, but either Dr. Charlus had uncanny personal magnetism, or his lady friends didn't mind major one-on-one emotional relationships on a hard and dusty floor. Unconvincing.

Which led to an interesting conclusion. The official report makes no mention that Dr. Charlus's tenancy of the room in Neptune Court was ever confirmed. My bet is that since Charlus was dead and the building in ruins, nobody bothered to ask.

As the murderer must have hoped from the outset, Whitehall operated in a "least said, soonest mended" mode. Exposure of the duchy spy might have compromised smooth relations with other exiles, the suspect was dead, and the flow of intelligence ended promptly with his decease. Jolly good show, on to the next problem.

Leaving us understanding that the room was taken to be Charlus's because Colonel Freddy believed so and because the dead man's calling card was

thumbtacked to the door. Hardly an ironclad title deed. . . .

But what struck me from the start was the crashing paradox of such a complicated, unreal, *ornate* murder in the midst of so much mass-produced death. Why a locked room mystery at all, carefully set up?

Charlus's son might see it as the wicked Secret Service settling a score without benefit of trial. But all the signs clamored otherwise. Professional hit-men—and yes, Britain was fighting for survival in the forties and such men were officially used, if not sanctioned—would have arranged a hit and run accident or simply bopped Dr. Charlus and slung him into the debris of a bombed house, to be found next morning and taken for a blitz casualty.

Why the sealed room context? Putting it another way, why not the embassy? As ever, Lionel Greer touches on the matter. He frets over making an inconvenient, hazardous trek through the London blackout when the obvious place to confront Dr. Charlus is at his base.

At which clever Chatto twirled his mustache and cried, "Aha!"

Had the murder occurred at the embassy, Charlus's colleagues would have been suspected and questioned. Less as

colleagues, mark you, than as people with ready access to the victim, living and working alongside him. The Neptune Court setting, regardless of its sealed room aspect, changed that. Millions of Londoners had theoretical access to it.

Remarkably, Neptune Court involved only one embassy figure, Colonel Freddy. And his involvement cleared him. *He* couldn't have done it, he found the body, accompanied by honest-broker Greer, seconds after they heard the shot.

But suppose we rephrase that? After they heard a sharp report that Feodor identified, and Greer obediently confirmed, as a gunshot.

It was wonderful to have Lionel Greer's exercise book with its faded burgundy covers in a mottled, marble pattern, and reflect that just as a thin man is supposed to be trapped inside every fatty, so a detective was pacing the corridors of the dear old buffer's subconscious, kicking the walls and swearing!

Greer has Colonel Freddy bustling along, smoking a cigar, even though he's deprecated the practice at length on several previous occasions. Nerves, Greer concludes. They reach Neptune Court and Feodor stops momentarily to *re-light his cigar*.

Archons of Athens! as Dr.

Gideon Fell would be honor-bound to exclaim at this point. It's an arcane matter, but your old cigar snob shrank from lighting the same weed twice. It wasn't done, any more than one smoked it with the band still on, or used a lighter instead of a match.

Granted, cigars were hard to come by in wartime and rules are proved by exceptions. All the same, I wondered whether Colonel Freddy lit his cigar in order to light something else when the time was ripe, without drawing undue attention. Something like a small firecracker.

- Contemplate the whole scheme flayed and scraped clean and pinned out on the board, and you see that was what Feodor had to have done.

Throughout Greer's account, Colonel Freddy registers as a cheap magician forcing cards on a hayseed. If I'd been with them that night, I'd have made a citizen's arrest on the grounds of deeply suspicious conduct, and worked things out later, at leisure. By gum, I would!

Now we start seeing that the whole thrust of the locked room setting wasn't to make a mystery of who killed Dr. Charlus, though it achieved that as a bonus. No, the aim was to establish who "couldn't have" killed him.

Anyway, Colonel Freddy and Mr. Greer rush upstairs where Feodor demonstrates that the door is locked. No doubt the key was in his palm, ready to be slipped home on the other side as he checked whether the room's blackout curtains were in place—conveniently obliging Greer to watch the play of the torch's beam for a moment.

Of course, Dr. Charlus had been lured to that room earlier, drugged, and left unconscious, ready for the play. And how did Colonel Freddy shoot him, under Lionel Greer's nose? In a word, easily.

Feodor used a silenced firearm. Yes, silencers aren't all they're cracked up to be in movies. By the same token, they can be so good that when a round is fired, the first sound one hears is of the bullet hitting the target. But the silencer didn't have to be superb.

In Lionel Greer's account, Colonel Freddy emerges as such a noisy little blighter: his boots star in their own right. They clatter through the pitch-black streets, they clatter up those carpetless stairs at Neptune Court, they make such a racket as he strides to the far end of the death room that Greer notices how much quieter his own shoes are.

More than enough cover for the silenced shot.

Earlier, Greer has been drawing Colonel Freddy, uniform and all, virtually button by button. He spends ink on the "toy of a stick." I think it stuck in his mental craw because having depicted a stickler and martinet, a military man who didn't know how odd he looked, but took pains to look that way, Lionel Greer was puzzled at Feodor's breaching uniform regulations.

Colonel Freddy had to, that night. The stick wasn't a toy, it was a single-shot weapon with a trigger-stud in the handle. Go to the London Smallarms Museum and you'll find such things in profusion, including a dainty little parasol version for Edwardian whores.

Boots banging, Colonel Freddy bears down on Dr. Charlus, flourishing that stick. There was no question of aiming. It's a sickening vision, even after nearly half a century, but obviously he used it like a humane killer, pressed to the target for an instant.

Then his impudence really takes hold. He tells Greer that Charlus had died only a little time ago, a memorable understatement. Mr. Greer records the blood starting to flow, if you remember. But he doesn't do his sums and stop to wonder why, if that was caused by the shot heard at least half a min-

ute earlier, probably longer, the blood takes so long to appear.

And in his final piece of information, Mr. Greer writes of Feodor gesturing with the stick "like a gun." By gum! *That was what it was.*

CASTLEBAY, DEVON, ENGLAND,
1982

Souvenirs

The cottage on the quay was small, the visiting party large.

There was Tom Chatto, beard trimmed to suit the seriousness of the occasion and wearing unusually formal clothes—dark jacket and pants that nearly matched without quite making a suit and, the final sacrifice, a tie. Firmly knotted.

Sir Gyles Arnolfi was out of temper with him. He had been nagging, all the way down from London in the train. "Eccentricity is one thing, dear boy, but you force me to cast you as an eccentric *ninny*. Of course Colonel Feodor rigged the whole thing. Of course he hoodwinked that egregious old ass Lionel Greer. That's obvious to the meanest intellect; every expert given a sight of the documents regaled me with the same conclusion.

"The point, I reiterate, is *proof*. Lena Brown, Charlus's daughter, wants it. As for inviting Charlus's son to our Sunday School outing, you must have taken leave of your senses. The man's a fanatic, obsessed. He won't accept your story."

"But he does," Chatto rumbled. They had a compartment to themselves, Duma Charlus and two Polish embassy officials travelling farther along the inter-city express. Chatto had spread the *Times*, crossword completed, on the opposite seat and sat at ease with his feet on it. "We went over Greer's essay together last night. As you well know; you've had me tailed ever since giving me this assignment."

Sir Gyles simpered at him.

Chatto rolled an eye. "Was that financial check ever made in 1942, when Charlus died?"

"No," Sir Gyles admitted tartly, "there *was* rather a lot going on at the time."

Tom Chatto grumbled, "It's like pulling teeth. Have you made the check *now*?" He swung his feet down and sat up. "It matters. Has it ever occurred to you that Charlus's son might want one thing even more than he'd like to embarrass Her Majesty's Government? He'd like his dead father rehabilitated, cleared of spying for the Nazis. Who aren't exactly top of his-

tory's hit parade with the regime where he lives."

Old Arnolfi sighed and said, "You were right. Dr. Charlus's numbered account in Switzerland—"

"A numbered account known to Colonel Freddy, who *claimed* it was Charlus's," Tom Chatto amended swiftly.

"Very well! The account was cleared six months after Charlus's decease. The Geneva bank says the account was closed by the source that opened it. They're hideously close-mouthed, but they do say that the account was opened by an organization rather than an individual."

Chatto nodded, half smiling. "And it was opened four months before Dr. Charlus's murder, when your lot started worrying over leaks from the duchy's exile government. Standard operating procedure to shield your own agent: smear somebody close to him who can take the fall instead. But Admiral Canaris's merry men hated to waste money, or maybe they needed it. So they let things cool off, and then asked for their marbles back. You'll have to tell Duma Charlus this, show him the supporting telexes and so forth. It'll alter his approach."

"Possibly," Sir Gyles conceded. "Chatto, why are we being dragged to the outer lim-

its of civilization and the known world?"

The burly man stroked his beard. "Typical metropolitan egoism. Nice little place, Castlebay. You never got back to me on the other query. Are Colonel Freddy's fingerprints still on file anywhere?"

"Much against the odds, yes. There was a question of parachuting him back into Occupied Europe, in January, '42. Special Operations Executive took his fingerprints at the time, in case Feodor's identity needed verification later." The old man shrugged impatiently. "Since no evidence survives, fingerprints seem academic, to put it kindly."

"We'll see." Chatto was savoring Arnolfi's displeasure. "Speaking seven languages is a pretty useless talent for a junk dealer," he added. "But it does mean you can harvest seven times as much gossip, in emigré circles. Amazing what memories they have, especially for scandal, anything with a hint of sex."

"One lady kept surfacing in the talk. Tilly Deverell, there's a name out of Surtees or Dickens! She led what might be called a very active social life in the forties, and she loved a bit of Continental style and polish."

"Dr. Charlus was a woman-

izer, a philanderer. We know he kept a string of mistresses."

"Sorry." Tom Chatto was suspiciously meek. "But she wasn't Charlus's lady. She ran with Colonel Freddy from two months after his arrival in London until the day he died. People expected them to marry. Tilly Deverell looked spectacular and talked posh to match, but she was a Devon girl, 'De'm born 'n bred, m' dear' as they say in them parts. Ten years ago she went home to Castlebay to live with her brother and sister-in-law. Five years ago she died."

"Her brother's a retired Methodist minister, her sister-in-law does good works and is a respected local magistrate."

Sir Gyles gritted his teeth. "You are too young to be so garrulous."

Chatto was taken aback. "The point is, they're witnesses of great integrity. People whom Lena Brown will trust and believe. Even her brother may be impressed. I've only spoken to them on the phone, I didn't dare meet them alone for fear of compromising today's experiment. But they seem ironclad straight and honest."

"It does them credit." The old man's tone was thinned by self-restraint, and Chatto relented.

"It matters, Sir Gyles. Listen, we've been saying that all the evidence vanished in that raid."

Not strictly accurate.

"Lionel Greer's personal diaries went to Manchester University with the bulk of his non-confidential papers, under his will. I got photocopies of the 1942 and '43 diaries, in case he mentioned anything to do with the case. As it happened he didn't. I like old Greer more and more, he was loyal and discreet when he thought it needful.

"But for the day after Colonel Freddy's death, there is this cryptic entry: 'Memento to Tilly D. She pursued me by telephone, all day, wanting news of the tragedy. Understandable; but what in the world could one say? I suppose it is theft, or stealing by finding. I am happy to answer to my Maker—she was so grateful, poor woman.'"

Returning the notes to his pocket, Chatto put his feet up once more. "Well, there was a thing! Like you, I jumped to the conclusion that Tilly D. was tied up with Dr. Charlus, and began following it up among my emigré contacts.

"But she was Colonel Freddy's girl. *Then* we were cooking with gas. You remember Greer's passage on Colonel Freddy's pegging out, falling in the street? He'd been under stress for weeks, but I think the heart attack was triggered by sheer frustration and rage. All that arranging, playing Lionel Greer

like a violin, and then the Luft-waffe does the whole thing for him! Feodor could have left Dr. Charlus unconscious, set up an unshakeable alibi, and let the bombers do the rest.

"Anyway, I was reading the diary entry again, and I went cold with excitement. Honestly I did. Memento, Greer says, and something about stealing by finding.

"What could he have found and stolen, that Colonel Freddy's mistress would have taken so gratefully?"

Despite himself, Sir Gyles felt a tingle of treasure-hunter's excitement, too.

"Yes," said Tom Chatto, "that's what I think. The infamous toy stick."

The expedition assembled at Exeter, which was as far as the train would take the London contingent. Lena Brown, fine-boned and looking young enough for her hair to be either ash-blonde or grey, had come by Land Rover with her husband, a raw-boned farmer-horsebreeder in sporting tweeds. And now the procession of two taxis and the Land Rover was parked outside Anchor Cottage.

Mrs. Pennistone, justice of the peace, welcomed them with a mixture of flusteredness and grace. "Our living room is *rather* bijoux, but we've borrowed extra

chairs from next door. And this is my husband, Archie Pennistone, Tilly's brother."

Mr. Pennistone, obviously used to meeting multiple strangers at short notice, as any clergyman must be, waited for them to be seated. "Mr. Chatto has explained your . . . um . . . mission, broadly. And it's very kind of you, Sir Gyles, to thank me for helping. But I doubt whether I can.

"Tilly and I were never close, until she came to live with us. She had lived, well, an irregular life, but she was a lady, and she never said or did anything to embarrass us." He smiled and spread his hands. "And that meant that she never discussed her past, d'you see!"

Chatto said: "We understand, sir. Before I go any further, can you assure everyone here that we have never seen each other before; that I have never been in your home; that to your knowledge and belief, I have never touched nor tampered with anything in your possession, on these premises?" He was drawing on oil-stained white cotton gloves as he spoke.

Nonplussed, Mr. Pennistone looked at his wife. "Er, yes, that is, no. I mean, you haven't called on us before and, er, the rest."

Duma Charlus, Chatto saw at the corner of his eye, was

'nodding in satisfaction.

Mrs. Pennistone, spots of color on her faded cheeks, said nervously, "It sounds terrible! Are we being . . . accused of something?"

Chatto cursed himself. "Not at all, and I'm sorry for my clumsiness. It springs from anxiety, Mrs. Pennistone. Sir, when your sister came to live here, I expect she brought personal possessions, pictures, ornaments, souvenirs?"

"Why yes, a few. They were in her room."

Mrs. Pennistone, speaking as if they were alone, said, "He means the glory-box, Archie." And to Chatto, "Tilly had one of those enormous, pre-war candy boxes, the sort like a cabinet, made of thick cardboard with lots of gilt and ribbon and suchlike. Towards the end, when she was bedridden, she kept it beside her. It was full of letters and photos and things."

"Is it . . ." Checking himself, Tom Chatto finished quietly, "still here, by any chance?"

She nodded and smiled. "We couldn't bear to throw it away, though it has no value now. Oh, how dreadful that sounds. Great value, to Tilly, naturally."

Her husband's jaw had set. "Nobody is grubbing around among Tilly's private letters and keepsakes."

"No question of that, Mr.

Pennistone," Sir Gyles said. "We realize that we're intruding, here on sufferance. But if the, um, glory-box contains an ornamental cane, perhaps a foot or fourteen inches long, we would very much appreciate a sight of that."

Mrs. Pennistone was moving before he had stopped speaking. They heard her feet on the stairs and then, overhead, the sound of a drawer opening. Soon she returned and handed something to Tom Chatto.

Chatto, large hands deft, turned and tilted and scrutinized it before extending a palm so that the others could see the stick displayed.

It was a toy, rather battered now, crimson silk cord reduced to a fraying stub of grey rope, the ivory crane's head yellow and dry.

"Malacca, Lionel Greer said, bamboo polished to a gloss." Chatto's thick finger smoothed along the tube, its black and tan blotches no longer shiny. His tone was almost dreamy.

"It must have looked like that in 1942. But it's steel, painted to look right. See where the finish is chipped? Probably from falling on the pavement."

Gently he pulled at and then unscrewed the tip of the cane, a little button of hard rubber, greyly perished now. Setting the scrap aside, he peered at the

handle, pressed firmly, and caused a small wedge of ivory to project from the birdhead's throat. "There's the trigger."

Holding the handle, his other hand tight around the tube, he twisted in opposite directions. Frowned, muttered, "It must be anti-clockwise," and reversed directions.

The thread was a short one, taking him unawares. Suddenly his hands sprang apart, the stick was in twin parts, tube and handle.

"Please, leave it!" He spoke urgently enough for Lena Brown to freeze in the reflex movement of reaching out to field something that had rolled across the parquet beside her.

Chatto knelt, working the point of a pencil into the open end of a tiny, tarnished brass tube. He held it up, still kneeling, for Duma Charlus and Sir Gyles to inspect. "Cartridge case, .32 cal, Czech-made in . . . 1936. The prints may still be there; the thing's been sealed away in here since Colonel Freddy died."

Charlus nodded abstractedly, turned to his embassy escorts, and began a rapid, forceful outpouring in Polish. Chatto, staring at the code marks on the base of the cartridge, the stigmata of the treacherous little cane's firing-pin, heard that the press conference must be postponed indefinitely.

"The Captains and the Kings depart," Tom Chatto mumbled, watching the last taxi pull away towards Exeter. Yanking his tie down and his collar open, he strolled along the quayside. Mr. and Mrs. Pennistone had invited him to stay for tea, but he had a mind for Real Ale in a pub.

When the first pint was gone, he ordered a round for the bar at large. "Tell them," said Tom

Chatto, "I'd like them to drink a toast to John Dickson Carr and Carter Dickson, coupled with the names of Dr. Fell, Sir Henry Merrivale and Bencolin of the Surêté."

"Bit of a mouthful," the landlord burred dubiously. Chatto, thinking of the relief in Lena Brown's eyes, the straighter back of Duma Charlus, grinned broadly.

"Fair enough, boss. Tell 'em to make it, 'Absent friends.'"

FICTION

TONY LIBR KILLER'S C

by Richard Ciciarelli

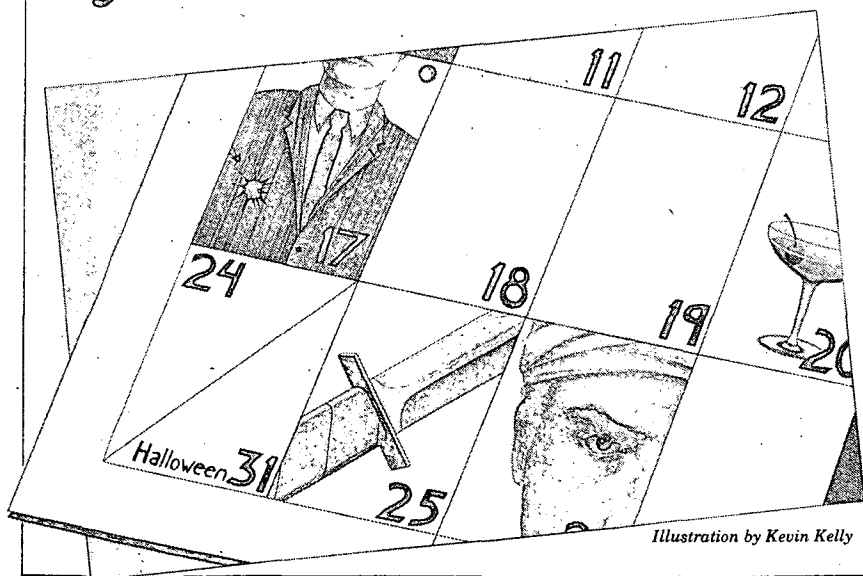


Illustration by Kevin Kelly

A AND THE ALENDAR

King Arthur, also known as Tony Libra, English instructor at Halstrom College, opened his front door and bowed to Julius Caesar and Calpurnia as he ushered them in.

"Pretty good, Tony, though the beard could be a little longer." Bill Barkley, Ph.D. in mathematics, hauled his toga up on his shoulder. "Who's Guinevere?"

"Jeanne Unger, one of the department secretaries. George and Myra Wakes are here, too. He's Mahatma Gandhi and she's Indira."

The doorbell rang again. "Excuse me, please," Tony Libra told them. "Go on into the living room and get yourselves a drink."

On the front porch Libra found a nervous man dressed not in Halloween costume but in everyday street clothes. "Henry," Libra said, surprised. "What brings you here tonight?"

"A problem, Tony. I need some help."

"I haven't got much time, I'm afraid," Libra said. "I've got some people here for drinks before the dance."

"It won't take long," the visitor said. "Only a minute or two."

Libra led his latest guest down the hall and into the living room.

"Folks, look who's here," he announced. "You all know Henry Jameson, don't you?"

There was a chorus of greetings.

"Be right back," Libra told his guests. "This way, Henry."

In the den with the door closed behind them, Libra asked, "Now, what's up?"

"Have you read in the papers lately about the trafficking of hard drugs on campus?" Jameson said.

Libra nodded. Several students had been arrested for cocaine possession but had refused to say where they got it. The police had no clues.

Jameson glanced at the door. Reassured that it was still tightly closed, he leaned forward a little. "I think I know who's supplying the drugs. It's one of our own faculty members."

"What?" Libra exploded in disbelief.

"I have no real proof," Jameson went on, "but I happened to overhear two students discussing it. They mentioned a faculty member by name."

"Who?"

Jameson shook his head. "I don't want to tell that to anyone except the police—maybe."

"Maybe? Why maybe?"

"That's where you come in," Jameson said. "You've been connected with police work. You'll know how they'll react. I can't be sure what those boys said was true, and I'd hate to go around accusing an innocent person to the police. What should I do?"

"Ask for Chief Backus. Tell him you're a friend of mine and that I referred you to him. He'll handle things very discreetly, believe me."

"You're sure? I don't want this person to suffer if he's innocent."

"Don't worry, Henry," Libra said. "The police can't do a thing without real evidence. If there is, none, they'll dismiss your story as idle talk."

"You won't say anything yourself, will you?" Jameson asked. "Not to anyone?"

Libra frowned. "Of course not. Now, how about a drink?"

Jameson shook his head. "Oh, no!" He paused awkwardly. "I don't think I could enjoy it." He rose.

"In case anything happens to me," he said with an odd expression, "just remember to check up on the calendar."

Six hours later Henry Jameson was dead.

"We've been tracing Professor Jameson's movements during the past twenty-four hours," Police Chief Wilbur Backus explained, "and we learned he visited you here last night, perffessor." Several times in the past Backus had called upon Libra for help; this time the visit was more official.

Libra nodded. "Henry did stop in last night, about eight thirty." He recounted Jameson's story.

"And he never mentioned the faculty member's name?"

"Never." Libra shrugged. "A matter of conscience for him, evidently."

"Well, we don't have much to go on. Apparently Jameson was walking along beside the park when he was attacked. His assailant struck from behind, stabbed him several times below the left shoulderblade. We found a large jackknife several feet away from the body; it appears to be the murder weapon. From the look of things, there wasn't much of a struggle, so Jameson must have been taken by surprise."

"He wasn't a very big man," Libra said. "Not much bigger than me, in fact."

Backus looked at his five foot six inch, one hundred twenty-five pound friend and nodded in agreement. "He looked a little soft, though."

"No doubt he was. Henry never was one for physical fitness. His whole life was his scholarly work. He was a philologist and loved it. He had written several books on the English language and any number of papers on word oddities and etymologies. That takes time. But go on. Who found him?"

"Two students coming home from the costume ball," Backus said. "About two o'clock in the morning. Jameson was dead and the streets were empty."

Libra spread his hands. "Well, for whatever it's worth, he did say something to me you should know. He said as he was leaving that if anything happened to him I should check up on the calendar."

"On the calendar?" Backus looked puzzled. "He had a small pocket calendar in his jacket but we didn't find anything significant in it. Maybe you can make some connection. Unless . . ." the chief snapped his fingers restlessly.

"What's on your mind?"

"It's a long shot, but who knows? You said you had company, faculty company, last night when Jameson came to your house?"

"Sure," Libra said, "but what . . . Now, wait a minute, chief. Are you implying that one of my guests is the cocaine

supplier who killed Jameson to silence him?"

"Why not?" Backus asked. "Jameson told you a faculty member might be the supplier, and you said yourself he kept staring at the door as if he were afraid someone was listening. On top of that, he refused to have a drink with them." He flipped back several pages in his notebook. "Now, you said your guests were . . . ?"

Libra looked unhappy. "George Wakes and his wife, Myra, Bill and Anne Barkley, and Jeanne Unger."

"Do we concentrate on the men?"

"Not necessarily. Myra Wakes teaches math. Jeanne Unger is on the staff. I don't know whether that lets her out or not."

"Think hard," Backus urged. "Did Jameson give any hints? Did he ever say 'he,' specifically?"

"He may have," Libra said, "but even if he did, I'm not sure it would help. Jameson's grammar was impeccable, and formal. He'd automatically have used the masculine pronoun to refer to his suspect whether it was male or female."

"Well, we'll start with your party, anyhow. I'd like to get word to these people to meet at the police station later today. Can you be there about two?"

"If I must."

At two o'clock Libra presented himself at the door marked "Chief of Police." Backus was at his desk.

"The jackknife we found near the body was the murder weapon, all right," Backus said. "It's a fairly common type and several years old, almost impossible to trace. No fingerprints."

"How about our calendar clue?"

"Here's the pocket calendar we found on Jameson's body. See if you can make anything of it."

Backus tossed a small pocket memo pad across the desk. It was of the monthly type, each page labeled with the date and, where applicable, the holiday and the phase of the moon. The rest of the page was blank for personal reminders.

Libra turned slowly through it. Most of Jameson's notes referred to classroom assignments. Some dealt with research on his latest book, others were simply initials. Libra took them for birthday reminders since October 11th, his own birthday, was marked "TL." October 31st was blank.

"Is it possible Henry meant some other calendar? Maybe a desk calendar in his office or at

home, or the next month's insert for this pocket pad?"

"We've looked. He had only a wall calendar at home; it had no markings on it at all. The desk calendar in his office is marked exactly the way this one is. We couldn't find a November version of the pocket date book."

The intercom on Backus's desk interrupted him. "The people from the college are all here now, chief. They're in Room 102."

"Good afternoon," the chief said, "and thank you for coming. I thought perhaps you could help us with our investigation. Earlier today Professor Libra told me you were all present when Henry Jameson visited his house. Maybe you saw something Professor Libra missed in Professor Jameson's actions. Or perhaps he mentioned something revelatory to you at some time or other."

Everyone around the conference table looked blank, but the chief went genially on. "Now," Backus said, "which of you is George Wakes?"

Wakes, a tall man in a corduroy suit, identified himself.

"Mr. Wakes, what is your connection with the college?"

"I'm chairman of the math department. I also teach math

and act as advisor to one of our fraternities."

"Were you very close to the victim?"

"Not particularly, no," Wakes said. "We'd nod to one another now and then, but I really never saw him much. I'm in the math building a lot, and Jameson spent most of his time in the English building."

"You never socialized with him?" Backus asked.

"Jameson seldom attended social functions. Once in a while he'd go to something special like a president's dinner, but that's about all."

"Last night when you were at Professor Libra's cocktail party did Professor Jameson say anything to you?"

"No. He came in, said hello, and disappeared with Tony into the den. When they came out, Tony offered him a drink but Jameson turned him down and left. I don't remember his saying anything to anyone except to Tony."

Backus turned to the lady who sat at George Wakes's left. "May I assume you're Mrs. Wakes?"

"Yes."

"Mrs. Wakes, what is your connection with the college?"

"I'm a math instructor. I teach calculus and analytic geometry."

"A moment ago your hus-

band spoke of his relationship with Professor Jameson. May I ask yours?"

"I don't think it will help. I saw Henry Jameson even less than my husband did. I was with George at most of those few social functions Jameson did attend, but I rarely get around the campus the way my husband does and so I hardly ever saw him there."

"I hate to repeat myself," Backus apologized, "but did you notice the dead man speaking to anyone at Professor Libra's party?"

"No. As my husband said, he glanced in when he came and again as he left but that's all."

The chief went on to Bill Barkley, who responded with a shrug. "I'm in the math department, too," he said. "I teach everything from freshman geometry to differential equations. I advise the chess club and the junior class."

"And your relationship with Professor Jameson was . . . ?"

"Practically nil. In fact, I knew him more by reputation than anything else."

"What sort of reputation?"

"Students' talk," Barkley explained. "The kids thought Jameson a bookworm and too fastidious. It seems he corrected them constantly and demanded precision in their language. They didn't like that."

"Sounds like he might have been a good teacher?"

"Oh, the kids didn't mind when he corrected their written work: they expected it. What they objected to was his insistence on oral exactness."

Backus turned to Libra. "Is that the way Jameson really was?"

"Yup. At least, in the classroom. Outside the classroom he was no different from any of the rest of us."

"Mrs. Barkley, have you any official connection with Halstrom College?"

"No. I'm a housewife; that's responsibility enough for me."

"Then I suppose your knowledge of Professor Jameson was even less than these other people's?"

"That's right. I think I was introduced to him once or twice before last night, but I never really spoke to him."

"That only leaves you, Miss Unger," Backus smiled.

"I work as a secretary in the English office. What I do, basically, is type notes and tests and other materials the English teachers pass out to their students."

"That means you've been in touch with Professor Jameson quite often, then."

"Well, yes and no. Whenever Professor Jameson had work for me, he'd leave it in a manila

envelope with a note explaining what he wanted done. I'd put the typed work on his desk when I had finished. We really didn't exchange many words."

"Since Jameson was quite a bit older than you, I assume your social paths seldom crossed."

"Never. In fact, last night at Tony's was the first time I'd ever seen him off campus."

Backus made some notes and leaned back in his chair. "Did any of you leave the living room last night while Tony and Professor Jameson were in the den?"

"What difference does it make?" Bill Barkley asked.

"Professor Jameson told Tony something in private — something potentially dangerous to him. Something that may have led to his death."

"And Tony thinks one of us killed him?" Barkley was outraged.

"No, he doesn't," Backus said. "It was all my idea. Tony refuses to believe one of you could be the murderer. All personal feelings aside, however, I must know if any of you were out of sight of the others while they were talking."

"We all were," Jeanne Unger confessed. "I went into the kitchen to get more ice."

"I went to the bathroom," George Wakes said grudgingly.

"I went to the bedroom to get

my compact out of my purse," said Anne Barkley.

Bill Barkley sighed. "I stepped onto the patio for a breath of fresh air."

"And I went into the dining room to see the beautiful gloxinia Tony has growing next to his hutch," Myra Wakes said.

Backus shook his head. "This is ridiculous. There's either not enough information to check on or there's too much. If I asked where you all were at about one thirty in the morning, I suppose you'd all say you were home in bed."

Five heads nodded in unison.

"Husbands will corroborate wives and vice versa, no doubt. And Miss Unger, of course, is too young and sweet to be guilty of murder."

"You don't have to be sarcastic," Myra Wakes snapped.

Tony Libra leaned slightly forward in his chair. Something was bothering him—something someone had said—but he couldn't quite put his finger on it.

"What I want to know," Bill Barkley announced, "is why we're suspects and Tony isn't."

"That's right," said Anne. "After all, you said Jameson was killed because he knew something dangerous, and Tony was the only one he talked to."

"That's it!"

Libra's shout, coupled with

his sudden leap to his feet, startled everyone.

"What's it?" Backus asked.

"Chief, I know who killed Henry Jameson."

"You've figured out the calendar clue?" the chief asked.

"No," Libra admitted. "It was something else, but I've been wondering . . . Is there a dictionary handy?"

Backus nodded to a uniformed policeman sitting unobtrusively in the corner. The man left the room.

"What is this calendar clue you're talking about?" Jeanne Unger asked.

"Before Professor Jameson left Tony's house," Backus explained, "he told Tony to check up on the calendar if anything happened to him. Up to now, we haven't had any idea what he meant by that." He turned to Libra. "Why the dictionary?"

"You remember that I mentioned Henry was an expert at word meanings, at their origins and oddities. Remember, too, he was a stickler for correctness of speech, yet he used the phrase 'check up on the calendar' when speaking to me."

"So?"

"So, what if Henry meant some other kind of calendar altogether?"

"Like what?"

"I don't know yet. But the man was a word expert. What

if, somehow, he was actually naming his assailant; hence the term 'check up on.' Why not just 'check the calendar'?"

The uniformed policeman returned with a dictionary. Libra opened it.

"Here it is," he said slowly. The room was very quiet. "There's a 'calendar' here spelled c-a-l-e-n-d-e-r, not a-r like the twelve-month kind."

"Well?" Backus demanded impatiently. "What does it say?"

Libra read: "'Mendicant dervish of Persia or Turkey.'"

"What the heck is that?"

"A dervish is a fakir," Libra explained. "One of those people who charm snakes and walk on hot coals and sleep on beds of nails."

"I don't see how that helps," said George Wakes.

"Chief," Tony said, "what picture do you get when you hear the word 'fakir'?"

"Someone in a loincloth, maybe wearing a turban."

"And at my party who was dressed like that?"

"The one who came dressed as Mahatma Gandhi." Backus rose.

Everyone turned toward George Wakes.

"You're crazy!" Wakes sneered. "Are you saying that Jameson was talking about me when he said 'check the calendar'?"

"Yes," Libra said flatly. "I am. I think when Henry saw you he assumed you were a fakir, or calender. He didn't think of Gandhi. Note the phrase 'check up on,' please. He was telling me to check up on you. He hoped I'd get evidence of your guilt."

"Well, if that's all you've got to go on, your evidence is pretty weak."

"But it's not," Libra said. "Something that was said in this room earlier bothered me. At first I couldn't pinpoint it, but it came to me when Anne Barkley reminded me that I was the only person Jameson talked to."

"So?" Wakes said.

"So you said I offered Jameson a drink and he turned me down."

"Isn't that true?"

"Yes," Libra replied, "but when I issued that particular invitation, Henry and I were in my den, not in the living room as you said. How could you have

known what I said unless you were listening at the door?"

"I don't know. I must have heard you tell someone."

"No," Libra disagreed. "The only person I told about my conversation with Henry was Chief Backus."

Backus spoke to one of his officers. "Norris, escort Mr. Wakes to my office and inform him of his rights. I'll join you in a minute."

Myra Wakes, eyes filled with tears, watched her husband leave.

"Thanks, perfessor," Backus said. "I think we can close this one with a little routine footwork now. You've been a big help."

"Yeah," Libra said half-heartedly as he watched Jeanne Unger put her arm around Myra Wakes.

"You don't sound very happy."

"Happy? That was a Halloween party that cost me two friends. Not much fun, after all, chief."

FICTION

The Haunting by Virginia Underwood



Illustration by Marc Yankus

Miss Mary came to look after Miles and me immediately after our mother drowned. We never knew how old Miss Mary was; she seems younger, thinking back, than she did then. Her hair was pulled back in a thin, tight mousey-brown bun on the top of her head. She always dressed in a long, loose sack dress that covered her from neck to wrists to ankles. Her hands and face seemed shockingly pale compared to our copper-toned, South Florida standards. She spoke as though someone might always be eavesdropping, in short, staccato sentences, so you thought you'd missed half of what she said.

Uncle Richard hired her the afternoon they buried Mother. I cried, but Miles didn't. He was fifteen the summer Mother drowned. Too old for tears, he said. He said Miss Mary was a babysitter, and since I was still a baby—ten years old is not a baby, I countered in vain—she must be hired for me.

"Miles. Florence." Our uncle's voice came from his diaphragm, not loud but deep. "This is Miss Mary." He presented her to us while we were still dressed in our funeral clothes, touching her elbow briefly, impelling her through the open door of the sitting room where we sat with Mrs. Franke, the housekeeper who had, according to her story, come with the beach house years before either of us was born, when Mother taught art at the Beach School.

Miss Mary stood entranced, silent, where inertia had stopped her, one foot on the wooden floor, the other awkwardly on the braided rug. I think she murmured, "Hello, children." I'm sure of the "children," punctuated by a rude snort from Miles. When Uncle Richard, tall, stern, and dark, followed her into the small sitting room, she shrank back somewhat, sneaking her left foot off the rug. Perhaps she didn't really tremble when he fixed his gaze on her; perhaps memory has added that flavor.

He does have a daunting effect on people, however, my uncle. While he was in the house, Mrs. Franke bustled about to make lunch, performing her chores with quick, jerky little motions inappropriate as much to her habits as to her frame. Finally, when her employer presented himself to her with his impeccable brown leather bag in one hand and her more reproachable cramped and scribbled account book in the other and she was sure he was ready to depart, she sighed noisily and often while he, unperturbed by her anxiety, gave his final instructions.

Miss Mary, having regained a bit of her insubstantial composure, had followed him from room to room, a few steps behind like a

timid consort after her royal husband, carefully watchful of a chance to be of service. He had proclaimed acceptable figures for electricity, water, and groceries, which Mrs. Franke confirmed on the back of a circular offering her one last opportunity to subscribe to *Life*.

Miles and I had joined the procession behind our austere relative as he went outside to discuss safety precautions in case of a hurricane. Miles, who was vainly aware of his growing resemblance to our uncle, consciously adopted his long stride and practiced the characteristic deep frown he wore. Mrs. Franke seldom went beyond the porch because of the steep, narrow staircase leading down to the sand, but she paced the distance of the porch matching the direction of our march through the sand around the front of the house. Miss Mary, starting after us, seemed physically restrained by the long strip of shade made by the afternoon sun against the broad porch. She strained to reach the porch railing, but, defeated by the visible barrier, shrank back against the wall.

Miles also noted her struggle to keep up with Uncle Richard and summarized it for my benefit, "She's sweet on him."

When he had put his brown leather case carefully into the back seat of the Buick, our uncle intoned some unremarkable speech to console us in our grief then drove away, leaving us to sort out our shattered lives as best we could. There was an eerie feeling of emptiness in the house. Miss Mary crept about drawing the drapes against the late afternoon sun while Mrs. Franke settled her uncomfortably plump body into the wicker rocker and called our lives to order again.

Miss Mary was installed, wide-eyed and hesitant, into our mother's studio bedroom. "Do you believe the spirits of the dead linger on?" she murmured to us, gazing around at the jumble of half-finished and forgotten canvases that constituted our mother's only legacy.

The housekeeper's rocker creaked steadily in the living room, and a too familiar glimmer sparkled in Miles's eyes. "I'm certain they do," he whispered in return. He nudged me to get my assent, and rather than suffer his certain retribution, I whispered, "Yes, I think so, too."

The conspiracy against Miss Mary was born.

We knew with the infallible instinct of children the entire litany of psychological cruelty. And Miles had honed his instinct with practice. We knew that Miss Mary was afraid of ghosts.

The late afternoon sun cast bright streaks of glare through the skylight against the large, forbidding portrait of our uncle that commanded the room. Mother had painted him in the brown bikini pants he often wore on the beach, a brown barely discernible from his copper skin. The painting riveted Miss Mary's attention as Miles, taking his cue from the canvas, assumed the posture and distinct set of jaw captured there.

Miss Mary shuddered, perhaps at our uncle's nakedness or perhaps only at the collection of paints, brushes, sketches, and canvases—the tranquil seascapes, the starkly realistic gulls, pelicans, and nude sunworshippers, the violent, surrealist storms. We helped her carry them by the armful to the utility room and stack them beside the old Kenmore washer.

At last we escaped to the boathouse where we could laugh at her manners and her fears without reprimand. The boathouse is a bottomless shed built against the dock above water level so a skiff can be hooked up on the pulleys and lifted out of the water. We were not allowed to have a boat, but the rafters made a grand, private place to curl up and await the privileges of maturity.

From our perch we could see the back porch and listen for the call to supper without ourselves being seen. Miss Mary came down the back steps at dusk wearing Mrs. Franke's wide-brimmed straw hat, but she didn't call. First she checked under the house, then she walked out along the edge of the water away from us.

"We should tell her where we are," I insisted, certain to be overruled. Miles didn't bother to answer but shifted his position as if to get a better view of the sun setting in the cove.

Seeming to reconsider the boathouse as a possible hideout, Miss Mary turned and walked toward us. Like a careful pedestrian, she looked first one way and then the other before timidly mounting the dock steps. The weathered old boards creaked under her weight, and the water lapped quietly against the pilings. Barely audibly Miles moaned, "Who-o-o-o."

She stopped. "Miles? Florence?" Miles held his hand over his mouth, glaring a malignant threat at me. Miss Mary turned with a sharp squeak of her rubber heel and fled to the house.

As she pounded up the stairs, we clambered down from the rafters, ran under the house, and came in casually bored through the front door.

We could hear Mrs. Franke's voice as she halted the rocker. "Did you find the children? You look as if you'd seen a ghost."

"I heard one," Miss Mary gasped softly.

Miles burst into the room at that instant full of angelic charm and rapid, one-sided conversation. "Here we are, Mrs. Franke. Is it time for supper? We've been down by the road watching the cars. We saw a green Mercedes. Boy, I didn't know it was so late. Did you, Florence?"

"No, I didn't either," I lied.

Miss Mary's ghost was forgotten, at least by our old mother superior.

We knew with the infallible instinct of children that Miss Mary was afraid of ghosts.

I went to bed soon after supper, lonely for my mother's voice, her presence, even the smell of her hair. Troubled by a bare tinge of guilt for the afternoon's escapade, I brooded about Miles's intentions.

I awoke with a start, the moon shining full in my face, with the certainty that I was being watched. Through the thin wall I could hear Miss Mary moving about, and knowing well that it was no longer my mother I could hear, hot tears stung my cheeks.

As I sat up in bed, wiping my face with the sheet, I saw her standing by the window.

"Mother."

She was wearing her white evening dress and her thick black hair was hanging loose over her shoulders. And then she was gone. I stepped up to the window just in time to see Miles pacing beneath Miss Mary's window. Fearing he would scoff at what I had seen, I went back to bed, leaving him to haunt Miss Mary by himself.

Breakfast was a strained and nervous affair. Miles was beaming and chatty; Miss Mary grim and silent. Only Mrs. Franke clumped lethargically from the kitchen to the dining table, seeming unaware of the tension. Announcing amidst his babble his intention to go fishing from the dock, Miles left the table, cocking his head in my direction. I feigned deep interest in cutting my egg until I

heard the door slam loudly behind him.

Mrs. Franke filled the void with her whining concern for the household chores, trying to elicit from Miss Mary some cooperative interest in changing the bed linens. In the middle of her discussion about the proper amount of detergent to add to the washing machine, Miss Mary interjected softly, "I saw a woman last night."

I concentrated on being invisible, a technique that often worked on the old housekeeper. Forgetting or ignoring my presence, she turned on the strange young woman with sudden, hostile curiosity, "What do you mean: you saw a woman?"

"I saw a woman in my—in the room. She was wearing a white dress, and she had long black hair. I saw her standing there."

"Mother," I exhaled.

"Nonsense, Florence. Long evening dresses and black hair! Nonsense. Miss Mary hasn't seen your mother. She's never seen your mother. Now help me clear the table." She bustled about getting the dishes done in record time, then retired to her rocker. Miss Mary did not respond to the flat denial of her vision but fixed her wide gaze on me.

I quickly escaped into the sun where, somehow, I knew she could not follow. Miles was busy constructing his own ghost at the boat-house. He had strung that indestructible nylon string from one of the boards on the dock to a piece of metal chain suspended from the rafters. When he tested his weight against the dock, the chain dragged across the rafter with an unexpected and distressing sound. Quite pleased with his contraption, Miles told me gleefully of having climbed the drain pipe to rap on Miss Mary's window.

"She saw a ghost last night," I confided.

Miles found that very amusing, and I didn't feel I had to tell him I had seen her, too.

As evening approached, Miss Mary became more inclined to leave the protection of the house and come down onto the beach with us. Miles, displaying his usual hypocritical hysteria, was exuberant, friendly. He brought her shells from below the tide line, explaining in cheerfully innocent detail how she could tell the live ones from the dead ones. He put them into her hands and coaxed her into a painful imitation of frivolity. I tagged along behind, miserable, still in a dark study about him.

He dragged some deck chairs out from under the house and set them up along the concrete sea wall. When she seemed comfortable and content, Miles thrust his dagger: "Did you hear the ghost last

night?" She blanched, and I thought she would topple off the wall into the sandspurs and broken glass on the lee side. However, Miles jumped quickly to her aid, steadied her chair, smiling solicitously and repeating, "Did you?" rather loudly.

"Yes," she whispered, "yes, and saw her, too."

"Sometimes she gets lonely down in the boathouse by herself, you know," Miles smiled impishly at his victim while I shrank inside myself, refusing to participate. "She drowned under the boat-house, you know. It's dangerous. We're allowed to fish from the dock, but Mrs. Franke worries if we climb up on the rafters." A look of genuine concern crossed his stern man-child features. "Would you like to see it? I'll take you there."

"No. No, please," Miss Mary squeaked.

"No?" Miles seemed puzzled at her apparent lack of interest. He knelt beside her chair, his hand caressing her gray sleeve. His resemblance to our uncle suddenly struck me, and confused, I felt my face growing warm. "When a person dies, you know, their spirit hangs around the spot for a time. Personally, I think Mother would be more comfortable in her own room than down in that drafty old boathouse. But then, if she's dead maybe she doesn't realize it's drafty. What do you think?" He plucked at her sleeve.

"Her room. Yes, her room," Miss Mary's hands trembled as she stood up balanced precariously on the sea wall, pulling away from Miles.

"Mrs. Franke must want us back by now," I fairly shrieked, frightening myself. Folding my chair, I ran toward the house dragging it after me. I did not look back.

It seemed a long while before they returned, and then Miles directed the housekeeper's attention to the shells he had gathered, effusing innocent wonder at their beauty and durability, "Long after the animal is dead, you know." He filled the house with his laughter, and his chatter seemed to stimulate the fat old woman, distracting her from the hysteria in Miss Mary's shrill little giggle and the pink coloring of her usually pale white skin.

Miles joined the women for a game of canasta after the dishes were done, but I sneaked off to my room.

Closing the door behind me, I could see the faint glimmer of sequins reflected by the moonlight in the darkened room. She was seated at my desk wearing a blue cocktail dress I had seen so often before.

I wanted to call out to her, to make her look in my direction,

but she seemed intent on reading something on the desk, and then she was gone.

Stumbling over to the desk in the moonlit room, I found Uncle Richard's last short note to us just before Mother's accident. "Dearest Annie, Miles, and Florence, I will come down on Thursday for the weekend. Try to be patient until then. All my love, Richard."

How often had we gotten a note like that? Such an ordinary thing in one way, though the pleasure he brought was not ordinary. He would come, tall, intense, and forbidding, to spend the day with Mother, closeted in her room or walking arm in arm along the beach while Miles and I were exiled temporarily to the company of Mrs. Franke. She told us on those days how Uncle Richard was scandalized because neither Miles nor I seemed to have a father, and Mother refused to live with him in Tampa.

We basked in his attention. My earliest memory is of him carrying me to my bed, up that narrow staircase from his car. "Be careful on the stairs," someone always said when I went out to the front porch. Danger lurked everywhere ready to pounce on careless children: "Don't go into the water." "Stay off the dock." "Don't play in the woods." "Stay away from the road." But especially, "Be careful on the stairs." My earliest memory is that I was safe, absolutely safe in my uncle's arms on those stairs.

I put the note in the desk drawer and crept down the short hall to Mother's studio. Opening the door quietly, I tiptoed in, hoping to get another glimpse of her. The moon, filtered through the skylight, cast a curious aura on the large oil painting of the bronze Apollo we called Uncle. Startled by the effect, at first I didn't see her. She was sitting Indian fashion in the middle of the bed. Out of the moonlight, the sequined dress barely glittered at all. She was smiling, but she never seemed to recognize my presence. When I moved forward, again she disappeared.

Days passed, but I didn't see the translucent image of my mother again. If Miles saw her, he did not tell me but devoted the last few days of summer vacation to the haunting of the pale, easily frightened stranger charged with our care. He stowed a long cane pole for window rapping under the house, covering it lightly over with sand. The ghost machine with its well-hidden string trigger on the boathouse dock assured him complete privacy from Miss Mary's nervous scrutiny. He spent long hours lying on the rafters gazing into the glassy dark water.

He would slip into the room which was slowly transforming itself

from Mother's to Miss Mary's and rearrange or hide articles from the new tenant: a scarf, a brush, or what amused him most, her underthings; nun's panties, Miles called them. He took discarded canvases—the naked strangers our mother had known and painted, somehow, sometime—and returned them to their former places in the studio for Miss Mary to find and to hide again with increasing grimness in the utility room. The portrait of our brown, scarcely decent uncle remained inviolate, untouched by either Miles or the nervous child-sitter.

An uncomfortable silence crept through the once noisy beach house. Even Miles was affected by it.

School started again, and we made our daily trek out from our monastic isolation to wait by the road for the yellow school bus and to break our vows of silence, but Miles became more withdrawn. Two or three times a week he would smile and caress Mrs. Franke, telling her the lunches she made for him were better than those served at school. He walked to the bus stop with me, waving and calling goodbye to the old woman, then disappeared along the lane, making his way through a cluster of sea-grape trees to his day's freedom. At three o'clock he reappeared, without comment, to walk home with me, confident of my silence if not my complicity.

This adventure led to a note from school which he carried in his pocket for several days until he had perfected his response. He typed a return note on Uncle Richard's bank stationery, which our mother had kept in abundance. The unsigned note, which aroused our own fear and respect, read: "Miles has serious asthma and requires much rest at home."

This note was so apparently successful it inspired Miles's ghost to leave messages on the same machine in the haunted studio. His first was a masterpiece of restraint; it read, "dock."

Why Miss Mary stayed on beyond the first week, convinced that she was wrongfully intruding on the privacy of the ghost of our mother, was difficult for me to understand at the time. As Miles strutted about in his new brown bikini, I saw only the brother who dressed up in a cowboy suit, a space helmet, or a Halloween costume for play.

Mrs. Franke moved less and less from her rocker as she gradually turned the care of the beach house over to Mary, with much verbal abuse and disapproval. The talk of ghosts annoyed her more out of a sense of proper breeding than out of conviction. She swore that *she* had not seen a ghost, and surely if Annie were to come back

from the dead, she would visit her children and her dear old friend rather than a pale, strange creature such as Mary. There could be no ghost. The moonlight might play tricks on someone's eyes, she said. Or if someone were dreaming about a person and woke up suddenly, the dream and reality might become confused. Anything else was nonsense.

When Miss Mary received the first typewritten message from her ghost, she carefully concealed it from Mrs. Franke and called Miles in to look. I stood in the open door feeling flushed, embarrassed, as he stood behind her chair reading the note still in the typewriter, his hands resting lightly on her shoulders.

Excited, he assured her his mother must want her to go to the dock. She trembled and wept, pressing her forehead against the palm of her hand. Miles petted and coaxed her so that I left in a turmoil of anxiety. Still, he could not convince her to go out after dark. After several days of "dock" messages, he added the word "midnight," still without positive effect.

In the late afternoons they walked along the beach together while I stayed on the porch brooding and glum.

When Mrs. Franke told us she smelled a hurricane in the air, we turned on the radio to confirm her fears. She unpacked the kerosene lamps and filled the tub with water. The afternoon high tide lapped up over the sea wall as the wind picked up. Miss Mary stood on the back porch listening to the excited screams of the gulls, deeply aroused by fear and wonder as the sky darkened.

It is a simple fact that children raised in Florida do not fear hurricanes. I was excited, anticipating the change in routine and thrilled by the tension in the air, but our house, built high above the water level, had survived them before. It would again.

Taking the ladder from under the house, Miles secured the back shutters, explaining to Miss Mary that the front must be left open until the wind shifted or the house would explode. He seemed to swell inside from accomplishing this chore. As I carried deck chairs up to the porch, he tossed his undershirt at me and strutted around in the wind bellowing at the clouds. We tied down as best we could the things we could not bring up to the porch. The wind was up and a light but steady rain had started to fall. The gulls had vanished, but Miles continued to walk along the sea wall, bare-chested and wild-eyed.

Miss Mary began to pace, rubbing her hands together and wishing aloud for Miles to come back in. The rain was heavier now and

the sky was black in spite of the early morning hour. When the electricity went out and Mrs. Franke heaved herself up from the rocker to light the lamps, she looked around, frightened at last. "Where is Miles?" she demanded.

"On the sea wall." I gasped the words, glad for the direct question, for the first time in my life not feeling I should lie for him.

She went to the back porch carrying a lamp. Stout, plain, and simple Mrs. Franke opened the back door as she had not done in weeks and, painfully holding onto the rail, made her way down to the sand. I followed, leaving Miss Mary on the porch wringing her hands over the flickering kerosene lamp. Miles had walked along the sea wall to the boathouse and was clinging to an upright piling facing into the wind.

The storm had only begun to feel its strength as we labored along in the face of it. Seeing us at last, Miles gave up his position. Running toward us with the wind at his back, he seemed almost to fly past us and up the stairs.

Mrs. Franke was breathing heavily from the exertion. Her face was gray and drawn. She grasped the banister, pulling her awkward body hand over hand up the rail. The screen door was flapping dangerously in the gale and the porch was empty.

I secured the screen. The wind whipped through the open porch, and I suddenly had an intense feeling of abandonment. Mrs. Franke went to her room off the kitchen and lay down.

I picked up the phone to call Uncle Richard, but it was silent, not even a dial tone.

Miles and Miss Mary were not in the living room or kitchen. I lit the stove to make tea for Mrs. Franke. Stripping off my wet jeans and shirt, I left them on the pile with Miles's wet things and wrapped up in an old robe of Mother's that I kept in the bathroom. Cold and nervous, I turned on the radio, listened for the hurricane news, and carefully plotted the new coordinates for the storm on the map distributed by our uncle's bank.

I opened Mrs. Franke's door and saw her lying motionless across the brass double bed, still in her wet clothes. "Mrs. Franke, do you want some tea?" The wind rattled the glass and the rain thundered against the roof, but there was so sound from her. Going back into the kitchen, I turned off the stove and sat at the table resting my head on my arms. It was too quiet.

Hardly breathing, I crept down the hall. The door to Miles's room stood open, silent. I opened my own door to cold emptiness, then

proceeded stealthily toward the studio. Oddly, I could hear them breathing over the sound of the storm, but I could not see them through the door, slightly ajar.

"We must go. You must come with me," Miles suddenly insisted.

"No, darling, no." Miss Mary's whisper did not protect her from eavesdroppers now. "Your mother will come here. She won't stay in the boathouse, believe me, trust me. Lie still and she will come."

"It's you who doesn't understand, Merry Mary." His voice sounded deep, cruel. Lightning flashed and I saw them sitting on the bed, arm in arm as our mother and uncle used to do. Feeling an unaccustomed rush of warmth, I backed away so as not to be discovered.

I lay in my bed listening to the wind through the afternoon until pangs of hunger drove me into the kitchen. I peeked in on Mrs. Franke who lay as before, unmoving. Again I asked if she cared for tea and again there was no reply. I took the lighted lamp from her room, since she didn't seem to need it, and returned to the kitchen. I made a strange meal of assorted perishables that would spoil without refrigeration, feeling virtuous.

I slept fitfully through the long afternoon, getting up to see if Miles had returned to his room yet. Night came and then, according to the clock, morning. The sky was as dark and the wind as loud as the night before.

Confident Mrs. Franke would be awake now, I finished making the tea and took it to her room. She lay as before, but her clothes seemed drier. When she didn't answer, I went back to the kitchen and, feeling very wicked, drank the tea myself as the milk had begun to taste somewhat like plain yogurt.

I listened to the radio and up-dated the hurricane map. "Well, it looks as if we're getting it dead on this time," I said aloud. Then I felt nervous and silly and went to look out the back door, but I couldn't get it open against the wind so I returned to the front. The kerosene had burned out of the lighted lamp, but I was afraid, having been severely admonished about fire, to try to light another. It was not entirely dark at midday in any case.

I tiptoed through the hall and stood by the studio door again, but it was shut tightly and I heard nothing.

I sat in the kitchen listening to the radio, making snacks for myself, and marking the map until the flashlight began to flicker.

In the late afternoon, the sun burst through and the wind and rain stopped completely. Passing through the eye of the storm

thrilled me. I shrieked with laughter and Miles rushed from the studio with tousled hair, half-naked, whooping, "Let's go."

The world was back in focus. Mrs. Franke would wake up now. Uncle Richard would come and send Miss Mary away. My brother would be a little boy again needing his sister to tease and to lie for him. Laughing shrilly, I ran out behind him to survey the damage. He was running in the direction of the boathouse, turning lopsided cartwheels and shouting wild, unintelligible imprecations.

The water was up beyond the sea wall and he couldn't reach the boathouse without swimming for it. Once he found the dock he could stand up to his waist in water and reach for the rafters. Miss Mary was coming slowly across the beach. She was still wearing her gray granny dress, but her hair hung down in long thin strands around her neck. And the world was out of focus again. She walked as if in a trance, not frightened and trembly as usual, but stiff and unreal.

Turning away from her, I ran up the beach looking for unusual shells that might have been washed ashore by the hurricane. I found one very large conch and carried it up to the house. I put it in my box on the porch and went inside. In a short while the wind came up full force again.

Mrs. Franke still did not seem to want any tea, but Mother did so I made a full pot. I drank quite a bit, but she didn't have any.

"I'm sorry you didn't come earlier, Mother. Miles wanted to see you. He's down at the boathouse looking for you now. I expect he'll stay there until this thing passes, don't you? He couldn't possibly make it across the beach in this wind. He shouldn't have gone out. I think he still needs someone to look after him. I'm afraid Miss Mary won't do at all. But I shouldn't be hard on her; she's probably never lived through a hurricane before, don't you think?"

Mother didn't have a lot to say, but she did seem interested, and I was certainly glad for the company. A hurricane can last for most of three days and that's a long time to be alone in a house like this. I had to drink her tea for her, as it was getting cold, then I poured her another cup. She was wearing the little blue polka-dot bathing suit she liked to put on when Uncle Richard was coming for the day, and her hair was rumpled and sleepy looking.

I felt warm inside thinking of him and wished that he would come. I finished the crackers because Mother didn't want any, then I went to sleep in her bed like I could do if I were sick and Uncle Richard wasn't there. The skylight was dark and I couldn't see his

picture now, but I could feel him there sitting with Mother while I slept.

The sun seemed to explode through the skylight. The wind was quiet, barely a whisper. The rain had stopped and the birds were back. Someone was pounding on the front door, and Mother was gone.

Uncle Richard was there with a deep, angry frown across his face. He brushed past me and marched straight to Mrs. Franke's door and knocked loudly. "She's been sleeping for quite a while," I volunteered timidly. The anger ebbed away as he bent over the rigid body. Taking my hand, he led me from the room and closed the door.

He strode through the house then, throwing open doors. "Are you alone?" he demanded.

"Mother was here," I answered.

Pulling my hand loose from his, he unlocked the back door. The boathouse was gone. We walked up and down the beach for a long time. People came, the police and a black ambulance for Mrs. Franke. They had quite a hard time getting her down the stairs all covered up with a sheet.

The sheriff said, "No tellin' where them other two'll be found." And my uncle answered, "I'll take my daughter home with me."

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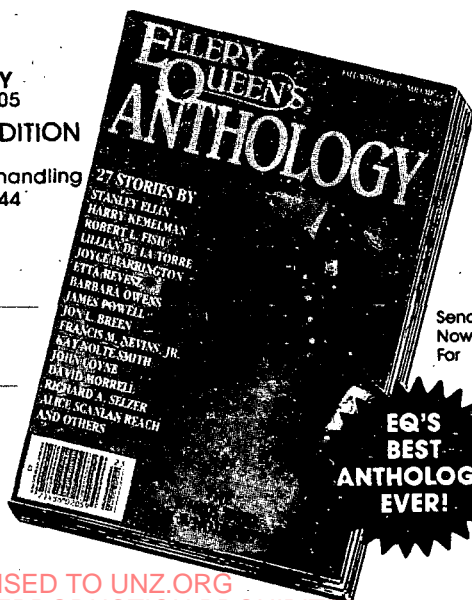
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FICTION

RAMBAUGH and the GALACTIC CANNIBALS

By Gary Alexander



Illustration by Ray Lago

Frank Rambaugh, chief property claims investigator for Unity Property and Casualty Insurance Company, was half dozing in his easy chair when they showed the fire on the Sunday evening news. The camera was in a helicopter and ugly, black smoke was pouring forth from a building below. He didn't give it another thought until the following morning when Oakes called him in and handed him a freshly-created file.

"Dalton Amusement, Frank. We don't cover the structure but we have Dalton, the tenant."

David Oakes was Unity's Seattle claims manager, Rambaugh's boss. He was rail-thin, a chain-smoker ten years Rambaugh's junior. He had the metabolism of a hummingbird, and his ashtray filled in proportion to threats against Unity's loss ratio.

"A bona fide mess, if I recall," Rambaugh said. "In that new business and industrial park in the south end. Dalton Amusement does what—pinballs and pool tables and the like?"

"Mostly coin-op video games. And that building was crammed to the rafters with them. They're a distributor. They lease the equipment to arcades and con-

venience stores."

"Did I hear the mention of arson on that telecast?" Rambaugh asked, studying the loss report.

"No question," Oakes said. "I called the fire marshal, too, as soon as I received the report."

"I see we also have business interruption coverage on Dalton," Rambaugh said, his eyebrows rising. "We pay his overhead while he's down."

Oakes lit a cigarette. "Don't jump to conclusions, Frank. That's standard coverage. And you know as well as I do that while arson is easy to determine, proving *who* did it is not."

Rambaugh kept the peace and merely nodded. And he didn't have to tell Oakes that as often as not the policyholder was the perpetrator, a devastating blaze being the most lucrative way to put to sleep a terminally ill business.

Frank Rambaugh nominally worked in the Seattle branch, but covered the Western states for Unity, handling the largest and trickiest losses in the Pacific division. His desk drawers bulged with suspicious fires and questionable thefts. Woe be it to a policyholder involved in such mischief who drew Rambaugh. More than one was off

the books, having no means to pay premiums from a prison cell.

"How solid is Dalton, David?"

"I don't know. They're a new client and this is their first loss. I'd guess they're doing okay, though. The video game industry is growing like crazy."

Rambaugh sighed and stood up. "No doubt you're correct if my son Richie is typical. His funds convert to quarters to oblivion in nothing flat."

"Please keep a leash on your hunches until you have evidence, Frank," Oakes said in a beseeching tone. "Whenever you call a policyholder a crook, I'm barraged by the insurance commissioner and every consumer advocate in town. Diplomacy, Frank."

To steal from Unity, in Rambaugh's view, was to steal from him. Rambaugh was a twenty year employee. He smiled. "Indeed, David. Diplomacy. Always!"

Bellewood Business Park was twenty minutes south of Unity's office. It was a sprawling complex of two and three story buildings. Many firms had moved from downtown for the lower rent and convenient parking.

Dalton Amusement took up

an entire structure. The loading dock doors were wide open, fingers of soot spread above them on the concrete walls. There were people in the end offices, which appeared to have been spared but for smoke damage.

Rambaugh took his leather briefcase and went inside. He was a large man with a middle-age spread. He wore a dark suit, a muted tie, and a hat. That had been the uniform of the insurance man when Rambaugh had broken into the field; he felt it pointless to alter his dress code for the whims of fashion.

Female employees and an apparently distraught man were sorting papers and washing smoke residue from walls and furnishings. Another man, wearing the dark blue of a fire marshal, was completing forms on a clipboard.

Rambaugh introduced himself to the distraught fellow, who was dressed in jeans and sweater. He was Rambaugh's age but in superior physical condition. He was lean, had a wiry perm and a strong handshake. Rambaugh imagined that he belonged to a health club. The thought of exercise made Rambaugh queasy; one possessed a finite number of heartbeats, should not squan-

der them hefting barbells and swatting tennis balls about.

"Miles Dalton."

"I assumed so."

"And this is Mr. Harper from the fire marshal's office."

"Arson?" Rambaugh asked, speaking directly to Harper.

"We pinned that down as soon as it was cool enough to go in. There were several hot spots by the far wall."

"Flammables?"

"It's just a matter of hydrocarbon analysis to verify what. Those machines are mostly plastic. You can't smell anything other than that God-awful stench, but I'd guess gasoline. They jimmied the rear door and doused cardboard cartons, shoving them under the video games."

"It's a wonder they got out in time," Rambaugh said. "They definitely lacked finesse."

"They probably rigged a fuse, but I doubt if we'll find the remains. It really cooked. Plastic takes off like that. Even the window panes are warped. The sprinkler system didn't have a prayer."

"Smoke detectors?"

"No chance. They wouldn't have been heard. It was late Saturday and Bellewood has no security."

"I had a burglar alarm on or-

der," Miles Dalton said, anxious to be part of the conversation.

"I'm sorry about this, Mr. Dalton, and Unity will do its utmost in your behalf," Rambaugh said.

"Appreciated," Dalton said. "Damn, they knew what they were after, too. They torched the Galactic Cannibals. Ninety units and my cost was four grand per."

Three hundred and sixty thousand dollars, Rambaugh calculated. But for what? "Beg pardon?"

"Galactic Cannibals," Dalton repeated. "The hottest new game on the market. I was one of the first in the Northwest to get such a large delivery. They came in last week and we were to begin placing them today. Everyone in town is crying for them. Better sound, top-notch graphics, the nearest to a 3-D effect you could find."

"What arrangement do you have with retailers?" Rambaugh asked.

"We lease them and split the revenue fifty-fifty. That includes service by us. Video games is the fastest-moving business in the history of the world, Mr. Rambaugh, and the clientele is fickle. A machine can make a fortune for two

months then gather cobwebs. State of the art changes, it seems, on a daily basis. This is a setback. By the time I get replacement Galactic Cannibals, it might be passé."

Rambaugh peered into the warehouse area. It looked like World War III. One of Harper's men was sifting through the acrid rubble. Stacked in the center and three-high on shelves against the near wall, were more games.

"Galactic Cannibals, too?" Rambaugh asked.

"No," Dalton said, slapping a fist into a palm in frustration. "They knew what they wanted. Those are mostly old ones that have lost popularity, plus a few old fashioned pinballs. Some pool tables and jukeboxes, too. We sell them at a big discount, some commercially, some to the public through newspaper ads. I haven't inventoried them yet, but I suppose a conservative guess is another hundred thousand or so. My mechanics might save some. Some of them weren't hurt all that bad. I just don't know."

We're getting up to a half million dollars, Rambaugh thought. Not to mention hundreds and hundreds of dollars a day under the Business Interruption Schedule. "Who is

the 'they' who did the torching?"

"One of my competitors," Dalton said, as if Rambaugh were dull.

"Any specific ideas?"

"I'm afraid not. We aren't on speaking terms. They have had a trickle of Galactic Cannibals, but I guessed right and ordered big. I could have stocked everybody in my territory and then some, blown the competition right out of the saddle."

"If I may, Mr. Dalton, I'd like to examine the damage."

"Be my guest," Dalton said.

Harper accompanied Rambaugh. "It would indeed seem that somebody would like Dalton out of business."

"But who?" Dalton said.

"Good question," Rambaugh said.

Rambaugh shone his flashlight on the few Galactic Cannibals machines not reduced entirely to globs of metal and plastic goo. Some of the picture tubes had survived, as had the glass bezels above the screens with their colorful lettering and illustrations.

The obsolete units farther from the center of the fire—obsolete as whalebone corsets, if Dalton could be believed—had fared better. They were recognizable, covered with

a stinking slime of smoke and chemical foam. Almost all those constructed of molded plastic shells, however, had slumped from the heat into eerie, drooping shapes.

Rambaugh walked out to his car, got his camera, and put on coveralls that gave him the appearance of an indolent dairy farmer. He much preferred claims of missing money. It was clean work and while he pored over ledgers, the only odor was that of perspiration and anxiety.

When he returned, Dalton met him with a handful of invoices. "When can we get this wrapped up, Rambaugh?"

"After a spot of investigation," Rambaugh said with a wink. "Home Office desires a fattened file. They become insecure if asked to pay without a ream or two of officialese."

Dalton smiled tightly. "Yeah, well, I can understand that. But here—I'd settle for a partial payment on the Galactic Cannibals. I'll submit a claim for the rest later."

Dalton gave the papers he was holding to Rambaugh. Rambaugh took off his glasses and cleaned them on a sleeve. He read. Indeed, on top, were invoices bearing the letterhead and corporate logo of LPE, Inc.,

a California concern that manufactured Galactic Cannibals. Also, a manifest copy from Pacific Rim Trucking, the shipper. It confirmed that ninety units had been sent from San Francisco to Seattle last week.

"I'm in a pinch, between a rock and a hard place, Rambaugh. I'll be frank. I guessed wrong on Attack On Saturn and Holocaust. Took a big loss. Either they were too hard or too easy or not flashy enough. My clients screamed and I had to pull them. Damn kids and their quarters, they can vote you right out of office, so to speak."

Rarely did a policyholder have proof of loss prepared so rapidly, so efficiently. Rambaugh, a certifiable cynic, tingled with warning signals. Normally, at this stage of a catastrophic loss, entrepreneurs were in various modes of shock, concerned about their employees and the abrupt layoff, suffering genuine grief. Small businessmen, Rambaugh knew, routinely worked sixty or seventy or eighty or more hours a week, crafting something from nothing. Most failed. The ones who didn't, the ones who had prospered, were nearly morose very soon, angry at the vagaries of fate.

"My agent recommended Unity," Dalton continued. "He said

that they were the best, that they didn't horse around when they had to cough up."

"We try," Rambaugh said, hoping to change the subject. "Tell me, don't distributors have exclusive territories? You said that the competition had Galactic Cannibals here and there."

"Usually, but Galactic Cannibals is so hot, LPE can write its own ticket. Maybe their next will be a dud, but with this one, you catch as catch can. That partial payment—"

"My highest priority. Now, if you'll excuse me, I will get on with the unpleasanties."

"Window dressing, eh?"

"Going through the motions," Rambaugh said, starting for the warehouse, only slightly uneasy that he had taken a cliché and offered one back. The guy, he thought, reeked worse than his loss.

Rambaugh arrived at the office just as David Oakes came in after lunch.

"The good news," he told Oakes, "is that I did not insult Miles Dalton."

Oakes lit a cigarette and looked upward, either at a flickering fluorescent light or somewhere above, giving thanks.

"And the bad?"

"I don't know. I'll tell you at

afternoon coffee."

Rambaugh got on the phone. He called other video game distributors in the area, verified that Dalton Amusement, Inc., did not own exclusive territorial rights to the products of LPE, Inc. He learned from Pacific Rim Trucking's Seattle office that the manifest Dalton had provided was genuine. He dispatched a rookie adjustor to Bellewood Business Park to snoop. The rookie, who was somewhat in awe of Rambaugh, reported that Dalton's neighbors had observed a double-trailer semi rumble in on Friday and offload numerous cardboard cartons. He contacted a pal with the police department's arson squad. They had also investigated, would in the near future be interviewing Dalton's competitors, would respond if the aroma in Denmark became oppressive. Rambaugh then got in touch with another crony who was in charge of a local credit reporting service.

"Frank, you'd like to know if Dalton is solvent?"

"I'd like to know if he's five minutes in arrears on his water bill."

"Give me a minute. We're computerized now. I have a tube on my desk."

"Splendid," said Rambaugh,

who distrusted the things.

"Rock of Gibraltar. You and me should be so fat. A line of credit from here to there."

"Bank?"

"Daddy."

"Beg pardon?"

"Dalton's old man owns similar outfits in California. Not just one but a string of them. L. Dalton Amusement, Inc. Five outlets in the Bay area. Evidently, Miles swooped out of the nest, and Dad put up the seed money."

"I owe you," Rambaugh said.

He hung up and retrieved David Oakes for coffee.

"The bad news?" Oakes asked at the elevator.

"Thus far, Dalton appears to be sanitary. On the surface, that is. I'm afraid we'll have to pay, although something tells me we shouldn't."

"I've never objected to paying a legitimate claim," Oakes said. "Even if a huge loss raises havoc with my quarterly figures."

"Your nose is growing, David."

Ellen, Rambaugh's wife, cooked his favorite dinner that evening—meat loaf, baked potato, green salad. It was Rambaugh's birthday and the often-distracted property investigator had forgotten

all about it. After dinner, he opened his presents—a bathrobe from Ellen, new slippers from Richie. Debra, their daughter, who was away at college and short on money, remembered to send a card.

Rambaugh tried on his new slippers and told them about the Dalton Amusement loss.

"Wow, Dad! Galactic Cannibals. It's the neatest game yet," Richie said. "Denny's has three of them."

"Denny's Arcade?" Rambaugh asked. "In the shopping mall? Where you fritter away your youth?"

"C'mon, Dad."

Rambaugh had an idea. "Ellen," he said, "I wonder if you could spare your menfolk for a while."

"Why?"

"Field research."

Denny's Arcade, Rambaugh thought, was fortuitously located, sandwiched between a pizza parlor and a music store that specialized in rock music albums. Symbiosis. It was clean and bright, nothing like the dingy pool halls Rambaugh recalled fondly from his own adolescence. There was no smoke in the air, tobacco or otherwise. Since it was Monday, many video games were available.

The three Galactic Cannibals were in use, however, so Frank and his son waited behind a chubby, thirtyish man in a sports coat, who was furiously manipulating a lever with one hand, a bank of buttons with the other. The fellow seemed to be suffering involuntary spasms and the machine was making unearthly noises.

"Damn," said the man.

"Better luck next time," said the machine.

"How much of an investment is required to become proficient with this device?" Rambaugh asked his son.

Richie was looking at his feet. "Twenty or thirty bucks or so, I guess."

"Good Lord," Rambaugh said.

"Damn," the man said, slamming his hands on the control panel.

"Nice try," said the machine.

The man scooped up his change and turned.

"Mr. Hinton!"

"Uh, hi, Richie," he said, blushing as he brushed past the Rambaughs.

"Who was that?"

"Mr. Hinton, my geometry teacher."

"Good Lord!"

Richie dropped a coin in the slot. "Go ahead, Dad. It's on me."

"What is this object I am to control?" Rambaugh asked. "It looks like a shark, but there are stars in the distance."

"A hyperspace shark, Dad. The button on the left controls his jaws, the one on the right the laser beam from his snout. The eating function is worth twice as many points as if he zaps something."

"Mr. Spock would deem this highly illogical, Richie. A shark out of water, let alone—"

"C'mon, Dad. Get ready. I'll hit the 'start' button."

"Welcome to Galactic Cannibals," said the machine. "The welfare of the solar system is in your hands."

"Hush," Rambaugh said. "What's—"

A creature resembling a side order of potato salad with tentacles dived at Rambaugh's shark and munched off his dorsal fin.

"You're in trouble, Dad. Move and fire!"

Rambaugh got off several bursts before the shark was torn apart by other indescribable aliens.

The machine beeped loudly and shut down. "Sorry, but don't despair. You can still save the solar system."

"Silence," Rambaugh ordered.

"You got 125 points, Dad."

"Is that good?"

Richie shrugged. "Sort of, on account of you being a beginner. The record at Denny's is around fifty thousand, and I heard that a kid in New Jersey got almost a million. You want to go again?"

"Absolutely not. This is pointless and sadistic. But I'll make you a deal. Introduce me to the owner and I'll stake you to the tune of three dollars."

"Last of the big spenders," Richie said.

Denny McCloud was a scholarly, tweedy sort with thick glasses. He was Rambaugh's age and sat behind the cash register, reading a magazine.

"Best thing I ever did," McCloud said. "I was an electronics engineer in aerospace. The second time I was laid off because of a cutback, I said that was it, and bought this place. You think those monsters ate your shark, come in on Friday and Saturday and watch those machines eat quarters."

Rambaugh told McCloud what he did for a living, and mentioned the Dalton Amusement case.

"Too bad," McCloud said. "I heard about it. Miles is a good guy. He gets his service trucks

out fast when there's a breakdown."

"But your Galactic Cannibals machines were placed by another concern?"

"Yeah. I had some on order from Miles, too."

"How about the competition?" Rambaugh said, fluttering a hand. "Rough trade?"

"I don't think so. I hear it used to be like that in the old days when they had pinballs that paid off, before they were outlawed. It's good; clean fun now."

"Possibly," Rambaugh said dubiously. "At the detriment of homework and college savings, but never mind that. Is there any manner of hanky-panky in the business you can think of?"

"Just rumors."

"My job is to sift wheat from chaff, Mr. McCloud."

"Counterfeit units. I've never been approached, but I'd know if I had. They try to sell them to you outright at a nice discount or give you a better split on a lease."

Rambaugh frowned. "I'd think it would be infinitely more difficult to create a bogus machine than to print twenties in your basement."

McCloud laughed. "Just the opposite. I'm an engineer, re-

member? All you need is an old machine of a similar style, new buttons and levers, a little artwork on the face, and access to the game you want to copy."

"Beg pardon?"

"Microprocessor chips," McCloud. "Little slabs of silicon the size of a fingernail. Under a microscope, they look like road maps of the world. With a device called an EPROM programmer—Erasable Programmable Read Only Memory—which costs a few thousand dollars and fits on a desk, you transfer the program you wish to pirate onto blank chips, and you're off to the races."

"Good Lord!"

"You bet. A company spends millions in R&D to develop, say, Galactic Cannibals and most new games bomb. Miles Dalton took a chance on some the kids wouldn't touch, for example. He lost, the manufacturer lost bigger. With counterfeiters, somebody else is taking the risk for them."

"A shame about the fire," Rambaugh said, simultaneously encouraged and confused.

Rambaugh tore his son away from Galactic Cannibals and they headed home.

"How did you do, Richie?"

"Okay, I guess. But that thing that looks like an anteater keeps coming and coming. How about you?"

"Okay, too," Rambaugh said. "It was a worthwhile experience."

Oakes met Rambaugh at the Unity cashier's desk. She was filling out airline script for Rambaugh—round-trip, Seattle to San Francisco.

"I thought you were sick of flying and travel, Frank."

"I am," Rambaugh said. "That's why I've been training promising young people in the branches to handle some of these losses. If I am served another microwaved top sirloin on the flight, I shall scream."

"I've been getting calls from Dalton and his agent, Frank," Oakes said. "The agent is howling the loudest. He has all Dalton's coverage. Auto, homeowner's, and a juicy life policy. If Dalton gets in a snit and cancels, he'll have to find another way to pay his utilities. There was mention of an advance payment until the total amount of loss is compiled."

"I know," Rambaugh said. "I'd be grateful if you'd hold his hand for a day or two, David."

"What's the fascination with San Francisco?"

"None whatsoever. But there is a phenomenon south of it known as Silicon Valley. The computer and microchip capital of the world."

"Where Galactic Cannibals are made, perchance?"

"Indeed."

David Oakes lit a cigarette and sighed. "Please keep in touch, Frank."

Rambaugh deplaned at San Francisco International, rented a car, and began a hair-raising journey on a freeway. Little old ladies and hellbent truckers were passing him flying, on the left and right. Fortunately, he took the correct Santa Clara exit, and crept along miles of electronics firms on a main highway until he spotted LPE, Inc's., plant.

Compared to others, it was relatively modest, but no backyard concern either, low and expansive. The paint, Rambaugh mused, might still be wet.

Rambaugh entered without an appointment and explained to the receptionist why he was there. He requested a meeting with someone in authority. After a half hour's wait, he was surprised to be ushered into the

office of Loren Philips himself, the founder and chief executive officer of Loren Philips Enterprises.

Philips looked hardly older than Richie, a scrawny kid with loosened tie and rolled-up sleeves. The office was a clutter of blueprints and folded computer readouts. There was a drafting table in a corner that seemed to get more of Philips's attention than his chrome and rosewood desk.

After formalities, Rambaugh discussed with complete frankness his knowledge of Miles Dalton and Dalton Amusement, Inc., and the role of Unity Property and Casualty Insurance Company.

"Counterfeiting is a major problem for us, ranking second only to espionage," Philips said. "I've never personally met Miles, though I know his father, Lee. He's a crusty sort and a major client. Miles is on his own in Seattle?"

"Other than the seed money from his father, yes," Rambaugh said.

"We're doing well, Mr. Rambaugh. *Finally*. Our previous products, Planetary Monsters and Innerspace Atrocities, were not so well received. We broke even on them, luckily."

"Off the track, but I'm curi-

ous. These games, are they not—uniformly savage?”

Loren Philips grinned. “Would you pay money to watch grass grow?”

“Indeed not,” Rambaugh said. “On the track once more, were the ninety units shipped to Miles Dalton?”

“Wait one,” Philips said, swiveling the head of his desktop computer. A bit of keyboard gymnastics and he had the answer. “Yes.”

“Serial numbers recorded?”

“Absolutely.”

Rambaugh withdrew from his briefcase a smudged list. “When I sorted through the aftermath, only nine metal placards were readable. Could you cross-reference the numbers?”

“Easily.”

“With your computer?”

Philips smiled. “You aren’t entirely comfortable with space-age technology, are you?”

“I don’t hold truck with spoon-fed, overly simple solutions, if that’s what you mean. There’s no substitute for legwork.”

“I thought not,” Philips said. In a moment, he added, “They check out.”

Rambaugh, deflated, continued. “Your twin nemeses, counterfeiting and espionage. I’m briefed on the former. You are referring to industrial espio-

nage on the latter?”

“Yes and no,” Philips said. “After Galactic Cannibals, everyone and his brother would like a peek at our facilities. GeeCee, as we call it, put us in the fast lane. My benighted peers would love to see what’s next. And there are the Russians.”

“Good Lord!” Rambaugh said. “The KGB is interested in video games?”

“The technology, man. They’re years behind us! The microprocessor chips in Galactic Cannibals are probably more sophisticated than what they have in their MiG-25’s. The Soviet consulate in San Francisco has ten times as many people as they need to process visas. They’re there because of us, Silicon Valley.”

“I’m amazed that you permitted me through your doors,” Rambaugh said.

“The thirty minute delay, Mr. Rambaugh. We made some inquiries.”

Rambaugh had an idea. He took from his briefcase the Pacific Rim Trucking manifest copy. “The machines, according to this, went from San Francisco to Seattle, not—from what I read—from here in Santa Clara to Seattle.”

“Explainable,” Philips said.

"As a service to our clients, we transport our products to any trucking terminal in the Bay area and absorb the charge."

"Generous."

"Selfish," Philips said. "It wouldn't be the first time someone entered a plant with a miniature camera hidden in his coveralls."

Rambaugh phoned Oakes from San Francisco. Collect, of course.

"I am delayed."

"Not indefinitely, I hope."

"Indeed not."

"Would it be gauche of me to ask why? The Dalton case, I presume."

"Correctly," Rambaugh said.

"Loose ends and whatnot. I'm calling Ellen later, too, to inform her not to expect me for dinner."

"Miles Dalton was in today. With his attorney," Oakes said. "When I told him you were out of town, it didn't do much to break the tension. Then they went over my head and called Home Office."

"I don't envy you your job, David."

Rambaugh heard the click of a cigarette lighter. "Frank, don't be a stranger."

Pacific Rim Trucking had offices up and down the coast.

Their San Francisco facility was located near the airport.

Rambaugh presented the manifest copy to the office manager and asked if it was authentic.

"Jane?"

A matronly woman came from her desk.

"Our lead dispatcher," the manager said.

"Sure," said Jane, scanning it quickly.

Rambaugh sighed and pocketed the copy. "Thank you anyway."

"Funny they went through us to ship to Oakland," Jane said as Rambaugh approached the door. "Going directly up the east side from Santa Clara would've been a lot faster and cheaper."

Rambaugh froze in midstep.

He arrived in Seattle late, too late to call David Oakes at the office. Oakes was surprised to see him early the next morning. He was surprised further when Rambaugh asked him to clear his calendar until noon.

"We're having company, David. I called Miles Dalton at home last night. He and his lawyer will be here at nine. I expect that they will be eager and prompt."

"Frank, if they're coming for their money, I haven't even requested approval."

"Unnecessary, David. Totally unnecessary," Rambaugh said, unzipping his briefcase.

Dalton's attorney was a hard-eyed man with a beard and an expensive three-piece suit. Rambaugh pegged him as a barracuda in court. He did the talking for his client.

"This is most expeditious for an insurance company," the attorney said. "And Mr. Dalton has prepared documentation for the remainder of the claim. Six hundred and nine thousand and—"

"Irrelevant," Rambaugh interrupted. "We are denying the claim on the basis of fraud."

"Hey!" Dalton said.

"Preposterous!" said the lawyer.

"Read this and save your hyperbole," Rambaugh said, giving the attorney copies of signed statements by employees of Pacific Rim Trucking's San Francisco station.

"They were reluctant at the outset, not wishing to become involved," Rambaugh continued. "But I persuaded them that if they didn't cooperate at this stage, their future involvement would be much more in-

convenient. Subpoenas to a trial in Seattle and whatnot.

"Mr. Dalton almost pulled it off. If that dispatcher hadn't gotten her shipments mixed up in her closing comment to me, he would have. It must have been confusing to her. She looked at the manifest copy and somehow overlooked the Seattle destination."

"They were shipped to me!" Dalton yelled, shaking a fist.

"Shut up, Miles," said his attorney, looking up from Rambaugh's evidence.

"Good advice," said David Oakes as he lit a cigarette.

"Yes, Mr. Dalton," said Rambaugh. "You did receive ninety units, but they were counterfeits. The genuine Galactic Cannibals games were sent to the Oakland warehouse of your father. He, in turn, sent the bogus games to Pacific Rim and they were shipped to you. Pacific Rim is a busy place and they were completely innocent. The cargo matched their paperwork and that was that."

"Yes, but even so, with this slight error, no fault of which was my client's, I'm sure, he did sustain a sizable loss," said the attorney coolly. "The publicity Unity would receive as the result of a trial would—"

Fire Marshal Harper entered

the room.

"Good of you to make it," Rambaugh said. "Nine fifteen. Right on the button. You've already met Mr. Dalton. This is his attorney. Perhaps you'd like to explain their options."

Harper took a file from his briefcase. "Gasoline was the cause. We are still interviewing people at Bellewood who worked the weekend. Some of them noticed activity in the vicinity of Dalton Amusement. Some didn't. Hopefully, soon, we'll have a composite description of the alleged perpetrator and his vehicle."

Dalton's attorney stood up. Dalton jumped to his feet nervously. "You will be hearing from us, with general damages for slander also demanded in the lawsuit."

"Have a nice day," Rambaugh said.

When the policyholder and his lawyer stormed out, Rambaugh asked Harper, "What are the odds of a provable description?"

"Slim to none," Harper said. "A bluff. It was dark and when people work overtime, they're not inclined to look out windows. They're busy or they wouldn't be there."

"I'm certain it was Dalton," Rambaugh said.

"So am I," Harper said. "We'll keep digging. So will the police arson squad."

At lunch, Oakes asked Rambaugh, "Why nine fifteen for Harper? Dramatic effect?"

"Indeed."

"Will he be able to put together a case?"

"Unlikely."

"Then we'll be hearing from Dalton again?"

"Also unlikely. His father, who did his utmost to bail him out of financial trouble, is in it pretty deep himself. The reward of those ninety Galactic Cannibals, with copied serial number placards mounted on the bogus units for Sonny—well, that's scant consolation now. There's a limit to parental devotion."

"Daddy, I think, will shove a sock in Miles's mouth."

"But they'll be off the hook," Oakes said. "Lee Dalton will cover himself in some way. We won't get a fraud indictment."

"I suppose not," Rambaugh said. "But at least Mother Unity won't have to dig inside her mattress."

"True. What do you have lined up for the rest of the day?"

"I'm playing hooky after lunch, after Richie gets home from school. We're going to

Denny's Arcade."

"You're hooked on Galactic Cannibals, Frank?"

"No. Richie says they have a

new machine that's even better than Galactic Cannibals. Think of it as professional curiosity, David."

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EDMUND CRISPIN

Once upon a time—in England in the year 1921, to be exact—a baby boy was christened with the name of Bruce Montgomery. Eventually he was educated at Oxford in modern languages, and worked there for two years as organist and choirmaster. He went on to become a successful composer of film music, and the regular crime reviewer for the *London Times*. Finally, some time in the 1940's, he adopted the pen name of Edmund Crispin and began writing the mystery novels and short stories for which he is best remembered. Bruce Montgomery died in 1978, but his iconoclastic Oxford don and super-sleuth Gervase Fen lives on.

Every Crispin fan probably has his own special reasons for delighting in these books, just as he has his special favorite among them. But there are stylistic elements common to most. Oxford is the setting for several of the novels, while a film studio and an organ loft also play their parts, and are patently rooted in autobiography. There are wonderfully zany chase scenes in more than one book; they are reminiscent of the *Keystone Cops*, with the same magic to make us laugh aloud. A few of the novels have mischievous references to the author himself, and in one instance a character even comments that Fen must surely be

close to a solution as the book is soon to end. Then there is the vocabulary, a crossword puzzler's delight, with gems like "nugatory," "deliquescent," and "asseveration" sprinkled throughout. What a painless way to increase one's vocabulary, though. Educators should do a kindness to high schoolers, and make these books required reading!

In addition to Fen himself, there are priceless characters, some of whom make reappearances (probably by popular demand). There's Sir Richard Freeman, chief constable of Oxford; while crime is Fen's passion, literature is Sir Richard's hobby. Needless to say, the two are often at loggerheads over their respective areas of expertise vs. amateurism. There's Fen's long-suffering wife Dolly (*The Case Of the Gilded Fly*), "a plain, spectacled, sensible woman," whom Fen gazes at "with something of the triumphant and sentimental pride of a dog-owner whose pet has succeeded in balancing a biscuit on its nose." (You see why I call her "long-suffering.") There's also old Wilkes, a favorite of mine; he's an old don who keeps popping up, irritating the irascible Fen to ever greater heights of rudeness. But then, as all the characters frequently point out, Fen is often quite rude.

Fen himself eludes a capsule description, for he's mercurial. I can tell you that he's tall and lanky and about forty, with hair that never stays slicked down. He nervelessly zips around old Oxford in "an extremely small, vociferous, and battered" red sports car; and when he's on the track of a crime, he has boundless energy and a shameless habit of dragging the most unwilling spectators into the fray. He's also an avid reader of detective stories (much to Sir Richard's disdain); and he's a conversational tyrant, indulging in pedantic outbursts now and again (which most people simply ignore), and loudly yawning when others try to speak. One moment he will exclaim "Oh, my dear paws," while the very next he will shout an outdated American slang expression (from all the detective stories he reads, naturally), which no one in hearing can even pretend to understand. He is an anarchist at heart, an iconoclast in thought, and a totally irrepressible character. He considers himself inferior to no man, but there is little that he takes seriously—himself included. Perhaps it's this quality that makes Fen so contemporary, even though the novels are all very "period" in their late '30s and '40s settings.

The Moving Toyshop, published in 1946, is considered a

classic. Here, as in many of the novels, there's a young straight man to play Fen's foil. One night he stumbles into a toyshop and discovers a body; he's imprisoned, escapes, and leads the police to the spot—only to find a long-established grocer on the premises. There's some fun with Edward Lear limericks as the clues, and this novel has one of the great chase scenes I mentioned.

But there's something special in all the books. *The Glimpses of the Moon*, for instance, has a blustery retired cavalry major who hates horses. He hated horses for the entire twenty years he rode them "on the job." And there are the misses Titty and Tatty (short for Titania and Tatiana, what else?), who share a single hearing aid between them, passing it back and forth according to conversational demands. There's also a SWEB man (he's a representative of the local utilities company): "His face was round and pink, a uniform clear pink like the inside of a young cat's mouth." Need anyone say more? Crispin often describes his characters thus, pinning them down like captured butterflies on a collector's mat.

The Case of the Gilded Fly involves a repertory theater company in Oxford, and the "impossible" murder of the ingenue in the rooms directly below Fen's.

This novel also has a perfect little ghost story, compellingly narrated by old Wilkes (much to Fen's disgust). *Frequent Hearses* is set in a British grade-B film studio, where Fen is allegedly working as a literary consultant. But as Fen "was unable to regard British film as in any way indispensable to the Good Life," he's free to pursue his real interests when a starlet supposedly commits suicide.

I suggest a new reader begin with *Holy Disorders*, which opens with a shyly engaging young organist commanded by a telegram from Fen to come to Tolnbridge and play. The regular organist, it seems, has been locked up in the church all night and has gone totally mad. A secondary character whom I love is Henry Fielding (whom *everyone*, on first meeting, begins to tease about *Tom Jones* but thinks better of it—everyone except Fen, of course). Henry is titled but hides the fact, and he's eager to get into British Intelligence. (The period is the Battle of Britain.) Unfortunately, he is something of a bungler. Fen has his hands full as team commander trying to rout a ring of spies.

Then I recommend *Buried Pleasure*, something very different. Fen arrives alone in a small town with the intention of standing for Parliament, although elections are only a

week away, and no one has ever heard of him. No matter, says his optimistic manager; the competition is pretty poor stuff. There's murder too, of course, and a smorgasbord of zanies: a socialist lord and his snooty butler, a deaf orphan, a pretty taxi driver, a mild-mannered male author of lurid gothic romances, a mischief-making poltergeist, and even a "non-doing pig" who keeps trotting home when his mistress tries to unload him. Fen grows more disillusioned by politics in direct proportion to his chances of winning the election, and his pre-election night—intended to ruin his race—is a delight. Then there's a running gag

about the inn in which Fen is staying. The owner, refused a government permit to have renovations made, has shanghaied his entire family and friends to do the work instead. Bit by bit the inn becomes more of a shambles until, in the end, it literally falls down around everyone's head. There's much fun to be had with this mystery as Crispin turns his satirical eye on politics and the bureaucracy.

You may have to do a little sleuthing yourself to turn the books up. Walker & Company has several in hardcover, while Avon and Penguin have others in paperback. I think you'll find your efforts abundantly rewarded.

MYSTERY REVIEWS

Convergence is a stunning first novel by Jack Fuller. It's for those of you who can never get enough of John Le Carré's labyrinthine cold-war world of espionage, nor ever tire of the sophisticated people who live in it. At the center of this intricate Chinese-puzzle of a plot is CIA agent Richard Harper, destined for big things in the Company—until one quiet, humid night on a street corner in Washington, when he is confronted by the two other men who were also intimately involved in the "Black Body" operation of seven years earlier, the operation that launched Harper's career. And one of the three is Harper's deadly enemy, a crack KGB man. To a master of the illusory such as Harper, there is no such thing as coincidence. So the question is: who is the target now? Even more frightening to contemplate is the question of who was conning whom seven years ago. Mature characters, strong writing, whirlwind action that moves from Vietnam to Hong Kong to the Pentagon, and a breathtaking finale—they all add up to that rare thriller that packs an emotional wallop gloved in suspense enter-

tainment. (Doubleday & Company, \$16.95, 384 pp.)

Loren Estleman gives us the third Amos Walker mystery in **The Midnight Man** (Houghton Mifflin, \$12.95, 230 pp.). This time the tough-talking Detroit private eye is hired by the wife of a cop who has been brutally gunned down by an at-large gang member. The injured man's buddies are out to get the cop killer, and the beautiful wife claims that her husband, hopelessly crippled, wants Walker to bring the kid in alive—so that he too is “put away” for life. Vengeance is the theme, with threads of assassination, hijacking, and political terrorism woven throughout. It's grim, but Estleman makes it work.

There are a couple of British mysteries by old hands. June Thompson's **Shadow of a Doubt** is the eighth Inspector Rudd mystery. (He's the man whose intuition and methodical habits are generally disguised under a slovenly appearance and a thick, north country accent.) Rudd snoops around when the wife of the director of a snooty psychiatric clinic disappears, and he unearths lots of secrets—though not in time to prevent more mayhem. The book's a lot like its hero: quiet, but stolid. (Doubleday Crime Club, \$10.95, 183 pp.)

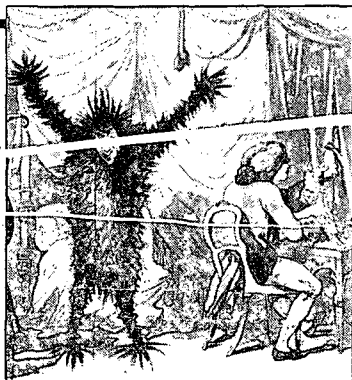
Bantam has also just published in paperback Catherine Aird's **A Most Contagious Game**, originally published in hardcover in the U.S. in 1967. (\$2.25, 181 pp.) The novel's protagonist is a recently retired businessman, forced into country life by a heart attack. He's delighted to discover a plastered-up priest's hole in his newly-purchased mansion; and when he discovers that it has been hiding the corpse of a boy murdered 150 years earlier, he energetically sets out to solve the old crime. The police already have their hands full looking for the missing husband of a strangled local beauty, and the contemporary action is a fine counterpoint to the historical mystery.

There have been two Masao Masuto mysteries to date, and now **The Case of the Kidnapped Angel** is out too. E.V. Cunningham's detective is a nisei, the only Buddhist detective on the Beverly Hills force. The case opens with the kidnapping of the mysterious and beautiful Angel Barton; but it soon turns to murder when her movie-idol husband is found dead, the ransom missing, and Angel back home, little the worse for wear. I could wish that Masuto were more intrinsically Japanese, but I shouldn't cavil; there's a twist in the middle, a somewhat surprising ending, and Masuto is an engaging protagonist. (Delacorte, \$10.95, 192 pp.)

CASES ON FILE

Ghosts of London

by Elliott O'Donnell



For many years there stood, and was standing not so very long ago—indeed, I believe it may still be there—a very old and massive red brick house in Highgate. Ivy covered its walls, which were not unworthy of a castle; rust was everywhere in evidence upon its handsome iron gates, and the paving stones of its courtyard were barely visible for moss. In its neglected garden there were curiously fashioned yews, fountains, a statue of Pan, and a thatched summer house, all of which gave it an

old world character, reminiscent of the days of Queen Anne.

The entrance hall, with its broad, handsome staircase and gallery, was composed chiefly of black oak, and the extensive panelling to be seen in most of the rooms was of the same ancient order. No one, it seems, had lived in the house for any length of time, latterly, because it was haunted. The following story which is connected with the haunting is guaranteed to be true:

The house, many years ago, was occupied by a wealthy man,

Above: A detail from a Thomas Rowlandson engraving.

From the book Ghosts of London by Elliott O'Donnell. Copyright 1933 by E. P. Dutton & Company, Inc.

whom I will name here, for convenience' sake, Black; and one Christmas Eve his son and heir, Ralph, an abandoned young rake, who had been away two years, unexpectedly returned home, ill. He was, in fact, so seriously ill, that his grieved parents had him put to bed at once, and sent for a nurse to be with him at night. The nurse in due time came and was shown into Ralph's room. As the doctor had enjoined the strictest silence, she sat down by the fire and commenced reading, pausing every now and then to look at her patient and glance around the room. Like all the principal bedrooms in the house, it was panelled throughout with black oak, and its large antique fireplace was supported by massive buttresses. In the centre of the floor was a sepulchral-looking four-poster on which Ralph lay. The only illumination in the room, apart from the fire, came from a lamp, which was on the table by the nurse's side. It was a wild night. Every now and again blasts of wind beat the snow and the ivy leaves against the window panes and, by way of variation, moaned and shrieked down the old chimney.

Outside, the garden and fields beyond lay covered in a white pall, which was momentarily thickening.

Anxious to see how her pa-

tient was, the nurse presently arose, and stealing gently up to his bed looked at him. He was on his back, apparently awake. His bright blue eyes were staring fixedly at her; his under lip had fallen, showing his long white teeth that projected fearfully from his shrunken gums, and his cheeks were sunken and hollow. One bony hand lay uncovered on the bedclothes. Not wishing to stay by his side for fear of disturbing him, the nurse returned to her seat.

About midnight, she heard him breathing very hard, and looking round saw, to her astonishment, a heavily-veiled lady sitting by his bed. She was about to get up, when the lady raised a slender gloved hand and signed to her to be seated and silent. Thinking the stranger might be one of her patient's relatives come to visit him, the nurse obeyed, feeling at the same time considerably puzzled as to how the lady could have entered without her knowledge.

From her slim and elegant figure the lady appeared to be young, but nothing could be seen of her face, on account of the black veil. Ralph's uneasiness increased, he tossed from side to side, and from his heavy breathing appeared to be in pain. The nurse again rose, again the lady in the veil signed

to her to keep her seat, and again she felt constrained to obey. Overcome with weariness, for she had travelled all day, she closed her eyes. When she opened them again, the lady in the black veil had gone.

The following night, at the same time, the same thing happened. The strange lady suddenly appeared by the bedside, and, as before, her advent was a signal for Ralph to get suddenly worse. Alarmed by his restlessness and heavy breathing, the nurse got up, and, in spite of a signal from the stranger to remain seated, ran to her patient's side. As she did so, the strange lady moved to the table, her face was still turned towards Ralph, whose eyes, starting from their sockets, never left her. The nurse now seated herself by his side, and succumbing to a sudden fit of drowsiness fell asleep. When she awoke, the strange lady was no longer in the room.

Frightened and mystified, the nurse crouched over the fire till the morning. When the doctor arrived, she announced her intention of leaving, declaring the task was more than her strength and nerves could stand. The doctor begged her so earnestly to stay, however, that she finally consented, sorely against her will.

All day it snowed, and towards night a storm came on,

increasing in violence the later it grew. The nurse, sitting by the fire, shivered each time the wind wailed and moaned round the house, and the ill fitting shutters and window frames jarred and rattled. Occasionally, during a lull in the elements, she could hear the ticking of the deathwatch in one of the walls and the scamp-ering of a mouse in the worm-eaten wainscoting. As midnight grew near, Ralph became more and more restless, and the nurse more and more anxious and nervous.

The grandfather clock on the landing outside was striking midnight, when the nurse glancing apprehensively towards the bed, again saw the same strange lady seated by it, and, as before, her presence was a signal for her patient to grow worse. Presently, his breathing again so alarmed her that, disregarding the signs of the veiled lady to remain seated, she ran to the bed. This time she started back with horror.

Ralph's face was horribly convulsed, his eyes, fixed on the veiled lady, were full of such terror that the nurse was appalled. She spoke to him, more, perhaps, to hear her own voice in that dreadful room than from any other motive, but he did not reply. She touched his hand: it was cold as death. Thinking he was about to die she made for

the door. The veiled lady at once took her place by the patient's bedside, and bending over him thrust her face almost into his. For a few moments Ralph's gasping and writhings were more terrible than ever. Then they suddenly ceased, and the room became ghastly still and silent. Urged by a sudden impulse, the nurse rushed at the veiled lady, who was now advancing towards her, and tore off her veil. Beneath it was no living face, but the grinning head of a skeleton. The nurse promptly fainted, and she was found still unconscious, some hours later, by the doctor and certain members of the household. Ralph was dead, with one hand across his eyes, as if to shade them from some object he dreaded to look at; the other hand gripped the counterpane.

That same morning the body of a girl, young and very beautiful, was washed ashore near Queenhithe. It had been in the water several days, and letters, in an ivory case, in one of her pockets proved that she had been on very intimate terms with Ralph, and that he had behaved very badly to her. Whether he was directly responsible for her death was not known, since it was never ascertained how she came to be in the water.

Those who were acquainted with the nurse's story were of

the opinion that it was the ghost of the drowned lady that had visited the dying man, and probably it was; but, however that may be, the nurse never recovered from the shock of seeing the ghost, though she lived long enough to give a lucid account of all she had gone through on those three eventful nights.

Before the Great War, when the police regulations were not enforced as strictly as they are now, I used to spend whole nights in Hyde Park, and I heard innumerable accounts of weird happenings, seemingly inexplicable. Many of these stories centered round a certain tree, for instance, the following, told me one summer evening by a down-and-out, whom I sat beside on one of the benches skirting the path that runs parallel with the Bayswater Road.

"I was strolling across the grass, close to here, one night," said my informant, who had once been in the church, at least so he said; "when I suddenly became conscious of someone in front of me, and upon raising my head—I had been walking with head bent in deep thought—I saw a woman a few yards ahead of me. She was going along in the same direction as I was, and the moonlight was so strong on her that I

could see every item of her dress. It was a shabby turnout, a grey worsted shawl, a rusty black skirt, very bedraggled and frayed, an old battered bonnet, and a pair of boots, with splits in the back of them, through which I could see her bare skin. She looked so poor and solitary that a wave of pity went through me, and I hastened my steps to give her the wherewithal for a night's lodging. Fast as I walked, however, the distance between us invariably remained the same, although she never seemed to make any alteration in her pace. We continued in this fashion, she moving along automatically, her head bent, and her bare heels glistening in the moonbeams, and I pounding away, straining every muscle in my legs to catch her up, until we came to a spot where several paths met.

"I then perceived, some little distance off, to my right, a huge, solitary tree with very curiously-shaped branches, one of which, in particular, riveted my attention. It stretched out from the trunk, at a height of six or seven feet from the ground, like a great arm, and it terminated in what looked exactly like fingers, long bony fingers, slightly curved, as if about to clutch hold of one. The woman ahead of me now turned sharply and made straight to-

wards it. She was entirely in the open, the ground on either side of her being quite bare, and, as I gazed, I perceived a certain indistinctness, a something shadowy about her that I had not noticed before. Again I hastened my steps, in an attempt to overtake her, and again the distance between us remained the same; but the moment she came under the shadow of the tree she turned round. As she did so, one soft brilliant ray of light fell on her face, and made every feature in it stand out with frightful clearness. I say frightful clearness, because the thing that looked at me was not living, it was dead—long, long dead. I got the wind up so badly that I ran out of the Park into the Bayswater Road, and spent the rest of the night wandering about the streets. By the following evening, however, I had pulled myself sufficiently together to come here again. I looked everywhere, going over the same ground, for the tree, but could not find it. At last, after making fruitless inquiries of several men who had been here for years, I asked a very old man, who I was told must know every inch of the Park, if he could direct me to the tree I wanted to find, and he, at least, was able to throw some light on the matter. He took me to a broad open space, which I seemed to recog-

nize, and pointing to a certain spot, said, "That's where the tree you are looking for stood, about twenty years ago. I remember it very well, it had a branch exactly like a human arm and hand, and it fascinated people, fascinated them so much that they used to like to sleep under it, and quite a number who tried to do so were found dead in the morning. One or two, I believe, hanged themselves on its branches. It was cut down eventually, partly, I understood, because of these suicides, and partly because it was said that queer things had been seen and heard in its vicinity at night."

No alleged haunting caused greater interest and sensation in the seventies and eighties of the last century than that of No.—Berkeley Square.

When I first visited London, as a schoolboy, in the early nineties, I soon found my way to Berkeley Square, and although No.—was no longer a prominent topic of conversation, it having long since lost its excessive notoriety, I was, nevertheless, thrilled when I caught a glimpse of it.

Some think they arose from the fact that the house was for some time occupied by a very eccentric hypochondriac, who shut himself up there and saw no one, inhabiting one room only and letting the other rooms

go to wrack and ruin. Sometimes he wandered around them at night, a lighted candle in his hand, and this, it was surmised, led his neighbors and people passing by to believe that the premises were haunted. Moreover, as the recluse was tall and haggard, the fitful light from the candle, accentuating his pallor, made him appear eerie and spectre-like; and thus it may have been that the report got about that the house was haunted by a very terrible-looking apparition. Other sceptics with regard to the super-physical were of the opinion that the story of the hauntings was merely an invention on the part of some caretaker, who wanted to prevent people, by scaring them, from buying or renting the house, in order that he (or she) might go on living there.

Allusion to this house was made by well known contemporary authors, and might be found both in books and articles. Lord Lyttleton, for instance, writing of it in *Notes and Queries* (November, 1872) said, "It is quite true that there is a house in Berkeley Square said to be haunted, and long unoccupied on that account. There are strange stories about it, into which this deponent cannot enter"; and the author of an interesting article on ghostly happenings in the now

defunct society magazine, *May-fair* (May 10, 1879), writes, "The house in Berkeley Square contains at least one room of which the atmosphere is supernaturally fatal to body and mind alike. A girl saw, heard and felt such horror in it that she went mad, and never recovered sanity enough to tell how or why."

"A gentleman, a disbeliever in ghosts, dared to sleep in it, and was found a corpse in the middle of the floor, after frantically ringing for help in vain. Rumors suggest other cases of the same kind, all ending in death, madness, or both, as the result of sleeping, or trying to sleep, in that room. The very party walls of the house, when touched, are found saturated with electric horror. It is uninhabited, save by an elderly man and woman, who act as caretakers; but even these have no access to the room. That is kept locked, the key being in the hands of a mysterious and seemingly nameless person, who comes to the house once every six months, locks up the elderly people in the basement, and then unlocks the room and occupies himself in it for hours."

During a nocturnal vigil in a haunted house, near Bristol, the late Lord Curzon of Kedleston assured me No.—Berkeley Square never was haunted. He said the stories relating to it were pure inventions, and I

understood him to say, too, that the house had, at one time, belonged to a relative of his, who, in consequence of the sinister rumors about it, had caused it to be demolished and rebuilt.

One of the most widely-known and hair-raising versions of the hauntings of the old house is this:

One night, in the seventies of the last century, two sailors found themselves stranded in London. Having spent all their pay in riotous living they were now penniless, and since they knew no one, they were both friendless and homeless too. It was a none too pleasant situation, they told themselves, especially on a night in mid-winter. After wandering about disconsolately for some hours, they strolled into Berkeley Square. Then, one of them seeing "To be sold or let" at No.—, was seized with an inspiration.

"I say, Bill," he remarked to his mate, "why not get in there? It will be better at any rate than sleeping out of doors."

Bill agreed, and after a look round to see no policeman was about, they descended into the area of the house and examined the doors and windows. The latter were strongly barred, but a few mighty shoves—they were both hefty men—against a door eventually forced it open. They groped their way in the pitch

dark till they bumped up against a staircase. One of them then struck a match—he had not done so before, for fear of being seen from the street—and they took stock of their surroundings.

They were in a stone passage, at the foot of the staircase leading to the first floor.

"Better upstairs," Bill commented, "it smells damp down 'ere."

"'Ouses that 'ave stayed empty a while always do smell damp," Mick, the other sailor, responded. "Suppose we look around 'ere for some wood or summat to light a fire with, and then make for one of the back rooms upstairs?"

Bill agreed. Being handy men they soon obtained wood, by the simple process of breaking up several of the kitchen dresser drawers and removing some of the skirting boards. Some loose wallpaper likewise came in useful. Armed thus with requisites, they made their way, as lightly as possible, upstairs, and after a hasty survey of several rooms, finally decided on a back one on the second floor.

Endowed with that something which usually characterizes sailors, particularly British sailors, and enables them to overcome the most stupendous difficulties, it did not take Bill and Mick long to make a fire in the small, rusty grate, despite

the dampness of the long-disused chimney. What with the ruddy flames, crackling wood and steadily increasing heat the spirits of the tired tars soon revived, and though they were hungry, a few sips of rum satisfied them tolerably well and made them feel fairly comfortable inside.

"Better than the streets or park, eh, Bill?" Mick observed, extracting a plug of tobacco from his pocket and wedging it with a grimy thumb in his pipe.

Bill gave a grunt, taken by his companion for acquiescence, and puffed away in silence.

"Funny," he ejaculated, after some minutes, "why some 'ouses won't let and stand hempty for so long. I wonder what's the matter with this one."

"Why should anything be the matter with it?" Mick rejoined. "There's more 'ouses than people what can afford to take 'em, that's usually the trouble."

"Maybe," Bill grunted, "and maybe not. I've 'eard that 'ouses where murders or suicides 'ave occurred in lie idle for years. Sooperstition, I reckon."

"That's about it," Mick said. "Surprising 'ow sleepy a fire makes one."

After this both men relapsed into silence, then, after a while, came the sound of heavy, steady breathing; they were both asleep, fast asleep.

Bill was the first to wake. A noise somewhere in the house disturbed him. He sat up shivering; the fire had burned very low and the air felt chilly. Fortunately they had laid in a good stock of wood, and in a few minutes there was once again a cheery glow. It was pitch dark outside, not the vestige of a moon, and a wind, blowing from the east or northeast, howled and moaned fitfully down the chimney and round the house-tops.

Bill took another sip of rum and was about to spread himself out on the floor again, when he heard another sound somewhere in the house. It was like the banging of a door, and seemed to proceed from the basement.

"It must be that blamed door we got in at," he said to himself, "yet I thought I made it secure enough. It's the cursed wind. Well, let it bang! I'm damned if I'm going down there in the cold and dark to fasten it."

His fidgeting about woke Mick.

"What's up, Bill?" he muttered. "Be the Roosians boarding us?"

(The great war with Russia scare was then at its height, and also the popularity of that old-fashioned music-hall ditty, "We don't want to fight, but by Jingo if we do," which was played by every barrel-organ

in London.)

"No, you blamed fool," Bill snapped. "It's the b—door we got in by banging."

"Better go down and shut it, then," Mick observed, "or some bobby will see it and nab us 'ere."

"I'm damned if I'm going down," Bill growled. "What, leave this 'ere fire and light and wander down them stairs in the dark? . . . not me."

"Nor me," Mick said. "So let the coppers come, dozens of 'em, for all I care. They can't say much to us for taking shelter on a night like this."

"And demolishing the kitchen dressers and skirting boards," Bill chuckled. "It will cost the nobs that take this 'ouse a quid or two to replace 'em."

"Hell!" Mick grunted. "What's a quid or two to nobs." He was about to add something decidedly uncomplimentary to the wealthy classes, when another noise, outside the room, cut him short. It was a footstep, to be followed immediately by another, and yet another.

"Did you 'ear that?" he whispered. "Someone's below."

Both men sat up, all attentive now, and listened. Footsteps were coming up the staircase, and there was something about them that puzzled the two sailors. They were soft and cautious, and gave the listeners the impression they were

either muffled, or produced by someone without shoes or boots, in socks or just bare feet. Every now and then they halted, as if the person, whoever he was, were listening. Then they came on again. And periodically the staircase creaked. Neither man spoke, but involuntarily they edged nearer to one another and shivered. By and by the footsteps came on to the landing and paused again. The sailors held their breaths and listened fearfully. Then, suddenly, Bill sneezed. Amid the stillness of the house it sounded like a miniature explosion. Mick opened his mouth to curse, but the words froze in his throat. There was something about those halting footsteps outside that thrilled all speech and action out of him. He had never experienced the like of them before. He sat quite still, staring at the door, and Bill did the same.

After a very brief interval, the steps began again, and, to Bill and Mick's consternation, they came towards the room they were in—soft, stealthy steps, more like those of some great animal than of a human being. Outside the room door they halted, and again Bill and Mick got the impression someone or something was there listening very intently. Then, in the flickering uncertain light

from the fire, they saw the door handle slowly begin to turn; inch by inch it opened, wider and wider, and presently they saw a shape—a thing so fantastic and indescribably horrible that they sprang to their feet in a paroxysm of terror. As it entered, creeping furtively toward Mick, Bill darted past it through the doorway out on to the landing. He heard Mick scream, but he was too obsessed with terror to think of going to his assistance.

With one hand clutching the banisters, he got down the staircase somehow and out in the street. Then he broke down, and a policeman found him; some time later, lying on the pavement in a swoon. On hearing his tale, the policeman, accompanied by several other members of the force, entered No.—and eventually discovered Mick lying in the back yard. He had, apparently, jumped from the window of the room in which he and Bill had slept, and broken his neck.

The policemen being, or pretending to be, sceptics where the superphysical was concerned, scoffed at Bill's story and marched him off to the police station. What happened to him subsequently the narrators of this story do not say, for with his capture by the police their narrative ends.

FICTION

THE WITCH CHILD, AND



THE THE U.P.S. FELLOW by Alan Ryan

Once upon a time (although, really, it wasn't all that long ago) in a land far away (although, if the truth be known, it wasn't nearly so far away as you might think) there lived a very old witch. She was old as only the witchiest of witches can grow old—older, in fact, than the proverbial hills, older even than the primordial slime that gave form to the hills in the first place. And what a sight she was to behold: bent

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nearly in half, misshapen, bow-legged (Curse that blasted broom! She had lately taken to riding the damned thing side-saddle, when she could bear to ride it at all, which wasn't very often any more, her arthritis being what it was and the night air so chill and damp, and side-saddle not being the safest posture anyway for broomriding, she had taken more than a few nasty spills, once landing wrong end up in a warm chimney, her

skirts around her ears and her bloomers flapping for all the world to see, at least as much of the world as was up and about at that hour of the night.), and with all the usual unsightly warts on her nose beyond the power of even the most skillful dermatologist to vanquish, and, it almost goes without saying at this point, one hell of a hairy mole right on the tip of her chin. Oh, yes, and snaggle teeth. It would be a mistake to forget the snaggle teeth. She was always very touchy on that point whenever anyone took a notion to write her up. She mayn't have been a beauty, but she was very particular.

This old witch of whom we speak lived—this isn't likely to come as any terrific surprise—in a most unusual sort of a house. Far be it from her to make her dwelling in anything smacking of the usual. No way, not her! The real estate agent had offered her the ever-popular gingerbread model, but she'd turned it down flat. Instead, she had a house made of dried cabbage leaves and stale bagels and various odds and ends of cafeteria foods, otherwise unidentified, and the cracks in the walls were pretty effectively stopped up with pages torn from old grammar textbooks which, the old witch firmly believed, would

pretty much stop up anything or anybody, much less a vagrant breeze. The house was ugly but it was snug.

She had lived alone in the house for years and years and, since she was never inclined to extend herself very much in the direction of hospitality, no living soul had ever set foot—even if a person willing to do so could have been located, which seems unlikely—in the house.

Even the otherwise friendly fellow—who drove the U.P.S. truck on the route that served her house—a fellow perfectly willing to stop by at other houses for a short while on a chilly, damp day to enjoy a warming cup of cocoa or other refreshment tendered by a kindly-hearted housewife—refused to venture so much as a toe past the rickety old gate that hung from a single rusty hinge in a badly weathered fence. Beyond it, an unused and largely overgrown path led from the road to the door of the house. The U.P.S. fellow would just drive up, stop his truck opposite the gate, say "Toot, toot!" very loud a couple of times, then dump the packages—marked "perishable," every single one of them—on the weedy ground by the gate. He knew the witch was old and unsteady on her feet—of course it goes without saying that he had no way of

knowing just exactly how old she really was—and ordinarily he would have been quite willing to carry the parcels right up to the house (as the company's rules, to be technical about it, actually required) but, no sir, not in this case. He had once, you see, accidentally dropped one of the packages. The side had split open and the contents, from the look of them, seemed to have quite perished already, although they were still making a pretty good show of squiggling around under their own steam. After that, the fellow had to grit his teeth just to lift the parcels from the truck and deposit them swiftly on the ground by the gate. Then he'd just toot a few times and drive off, and that old witch could just flit down to the gate on her broom and flit right back on up to the house with the packages tucked under her arm, for all of him.

The neighbors, of course, had given up coming to call hundreds of years before. When people get the cold shoulder too many times, even the sturdiest of welcome wagons breaks down.

So the old witch continued to live in solitary splendor and she liked it just fine, she did.

And then everything changed.

The day everything changed was going along, until it hap-

pened, pretty much like any other day. The tattered curtains were drawn across the grimy windows to keep out the sunlight, the cat was yowling piteously in the cellar (a long, drawn out "Meooooow!"), the grayed sheets sagged silently and sadly across the bulky outlines of the antiquated furniture, and from time to time, just for good measure, a floorboard uttered a snap or a groan quite of its own accord, as if eager to keep up its end of things. The old witch, as was her custom, was doing the housework, which consisted mainly of scattering a new layer of dust on the sideboard and stirring some greasy concoction on the stove. Quite an ordinary day, and the witch was contentedly humming a favorite cackle as she worked.

Then the doorbell chimed.

The witch jumped and yelped at the unexpected sound and, in her fluster, accidentally dropped an extra handful of dust into the stewpot she was stirring.

In the cellar, the cat cried, "Meooooow!"

The witch's surprise (and the cat's too, for that matter) can best be understood by reflecting on the fact that, as near as can be calculated from the evidence available, no one had come calling for several centuries, always excepting the U.P.S. fellow who, as we've already noted,

confined himself to tooting in the road and never actually came up to the door. (It might also be noted in passing, and in the interests of accuracy, that the doorbell didn't actually chime, properly speaking. In truth, the sound it made was more on the order of a dry rattle, rather like the sound made by a handful of bleached bones

being rubbed vigorously together. It was a curious device, devilishly clever, but there's no need to dwell further on it here.)

Then, before the old witch had quite recovered from the first surprise, the doorbell chimed—or rattled, whichever way you want to view it—again.

"Blast!" the witch muttered. (Her snaggle teeth made it come out more like "Blatht" but, out of consideration for a senior citizen, we'll let it pass for now.) "Who in blazes could that be?"

Eyes fixed on the door and head cocked alertly to one side (an awkward and painful posture for a witch of her years, but custom, after all, is custom), she slowly hobbled across the single small room of the house. Only when she reached the door and actually grasped the handle with her gnarled fingers did she hesitate.

"Who's there?" she cried out.

"Me," said a tiny whisper of a voice, barely audible, on the other side of the door.

"Oh," said the witch. She was, remember, quite startled to begin with and she had little or no experience in dealing with callers, so the situation already had her totally flummoxed. Before she could gather her wits safely about her like a shroud, her bony fingers had plucked at the doorhandle. Hinges squealing, the door swung partially open.

The witch was so taken aback by what she saw on her doorstep that she ignored the bright rays of the sun that struck her full in her withered face.

"Ach!" she cried, or words to that effect.

There on the doorstep stood the prettiest little girl in all the world. It would be misleading, of course, to say that she was the prettiest little girl the witch had ever seen in all her long life because, naturally enough, the witch was hardly in the habit of entertaining little girls. Even if she was—which certainly wasn't the case and never would be—her preference would have gone every time to the ugly ones, and the pretty ones could fend for themselves and welcome to it. But, in any case, the old witch had no experience whatever with little girls, pretty or otherwise, and she was so thrown off balance by the sight of the lovely child on her doorstep, surrounded by the over-

weening weeds of the front yard, that she simply stood and stared.

The little girl was only about so high, and she was blonde and blue-eyed and fair-skinned, all the things you might think, and she was wearing just the prettiest of neat pink pinafores and there were soft pink ribbons tied in big floppy bows in her hair and her little white socks were pulled up neatly around her ankles (and not a spot of mud on them!) and her black patent leather Mary Janes were polished so brightly that they reflected the sunshine into the witch's eyes and made them tear.

"I'm lost," the child said in a voice that quavered fair to rival the witch's own.

The witch, who was beginning now to recover her wits a little, bent closer to the child and stared sharply into her blue eyes. "Lost?" she inquired carefully, a hint of an involuntary cackle starting at the back of her throat.

The child, her lovely blue eyes wide and frightened, nodded up at the hovering witch.

"Is that right?" said the witch, just managing to choke back the monstrous cackle that threatened to erupt.

"Yes," the child murmured in a pathetic little voice, lower lip hinting at a tremble. "I'm lost and I'm hungry and I'm cold

and I'm frightened." With that said—which seemed, the witch noted with pleasure, to thoroughly sap what little strength remained to her—the child lowered her head and stared, in time-honored fashion, at her patent leather shoes.

"Hmm," the witch said. "Lost, eh? And hungry and cold? And frightened? You did say frightened, didn't you? I thought you did. You did, didn't you?" She peered narrowly at the child.

The little girl nodded without looking up from her contemplation of her shoes.

Lost, the witch thought to herself, and hungry and cold and, best of all, frightened. Frightened! A silent cackle of glee shook her rounded shoulders.

"Well, then," she cried, "you must come right in, mustn't you?" and she threw the door wide open.

So eager was the witch to draw the child into the house, where she could all the better enjoy the little one's thoroughgoing misery, that she failed to note the disparity of truth between the child's claim of being cold and the obviously warm sunshine that had been all the while bathing her own wrinkled face in its rays.

The interior of the house, as suggested earlier, was a para-

gon of nastiness, with its musty gray sheets and dusty gray shelves and snapping and groaning floorboards and the cat yowling piteously in the cellar, to make no mention of the noisome brew now bubbling madly on the stove. The child seemed not to notice. Rather, she gave the appearance of a child who has suddenly found shelter from the storm, although, in this particular instance, of course, storm there was none. This important fact the witch still failed to notice, so gleeful was she at the odd twist of fate that had brought suffering and attendant misery raining down, so she thought, on the child's head.

"Lost, eh?" she cackled with delight, and rubbed her hands together. "And hungry? And cold? And frightened? You are frightened, aren't you? You said you were frightened. Would it be safe to assume you are still frightened? Maybe even just a little more frightened than before? A little? Eh? Eh?" She continued rubbing her hands vigorously together in an absolute transport of wicked pleasure. This, just by the way, was no mean feat, as her gnarled and bony fingers kept getting in the way of each other and threatening to tangle up beyond all hope of untangling. But rub away she did, unmind-

ful of the danger. "Eh? Eh?"

"Oh, yes," the child dutifully replied, "much more frightened than before."

"Heh, heh," said the witch. Clearly, she still hadn't caught on about the sunlight.

After some minutes spent in very pleasant contemplation of the child's dejected look and drooping head, the witch took hold of the little girl's shoulder, being careful to press her bony but strong fingers painfully into the tender flesh, and drew the child across the room until they stood together before the stove.

"Do you see this big old pot?" the witch asked, her voice positively husky with excitement and anticipation.

"Yes'm," the child said politely.

"And can you guess what I'm cooking in that pot?" Saying this, the witch had all she could do to keep her fingers pressed hard into the child's shoulder, so great was the urge to rub her hands together.

The child, her wide eyes barely on a level with the top of the stove and the bottom of the pot, shook her head in silence.

"No, of course not," cried the witch, barely containing her excitement, "of course you can't! You're too little to see into the pot, aren't you? Too little, too tiny, too . . . too . . ." Words

failed her at this point and she had to feign a violent coughing spell to conceal the chortling that threatened to shake her old bones apart.

When at last she managed to catch her breath, the witch asked the child, as innocently as she could manage (which, as you may imagine, wasn't all that innocent but was, so the witch figured, close enough to fool a dumb little kid), "Would you like me to lift you up so you can look into the pot yourself?"

"Yes, please," the child whispered in her tiniest little voice, and bobbed her head up and down.

"Oh, boy! Oh, boy!" cried the witch, and shivered from head to toe. "I mean, oh, toys, oh, toys, yes, that's right, oh, toys, toys, we must find you some toys to play with, toys, of course, oh, won't that be lovely to have some new toys!" The witch, to give credit where it's due, hadn't really made all that bad a recovery from her little slip there. But, suddenly worried that she might miss her opportunity, she instantly thought, better get on with the thing while the getting's good. Here's the child, here's the pot, pop her right in while the brew's still hot!

"Well, then," said the witch, in as close as she could get to a soothing voice, "let's get on with it, shall we?" And with

that, she clasped the child around her teensy waist, squeezed as hard as she could, and lifted the child up, up, up toward the rim of the steaming, bubbling pot.

"Upsa daisy!" cried the witch as she lifted the silent child.

For a single timeless moment, witch and child hung suspended over the pot, peering—with very different thoughts and emotions, it may be assumed—through the swirling vapors to the surface of the brew.

All manner of unpleasant things floated there among the bubbles, then bobbed beneath the surface, only to be replaced by even more unpleasant things. Some of the objects had the vague shape of things you might think you recognize in a fog but that turn out to be something else. Some others appeared to be only parts of things, unknowable without the wholes from which they had been—dare we say it?—detached. Plus other things it's best not to mention at all. Considered in its entirety, it was a noxious brew and, beyond this, the less said about it the better.

The odorous fumes swirled around the heads of the witch and the child. In that single timeless moment, neither moved, neither spoke.

And it was just at that precise

moment of high drama and exquisite tension that the witch heard the "Toot, toot!" of the U.P.S. fellow, a sound as hated as it was familiar.

"Oh, blast!" she snarled. "Blast and drat! Isn't that always the way! Just go and get involved in something for a minute and the whole world decides to phone you up or come knocking at the door or tooting in the road. Blast! Blast! Blast!" She actually shook with rage and frustration, clearly giving not a moment's thought to the fact that no one had phoned her up or, until the arrival of the child, come knocking at her door in absolute millennia—with the exception of the U.P.S. fellow who, of course, confined himself to tooting and never, as noted, actually knocked. Some people, witches in particular, are determined to be miserable.

"Meooooow!" cried the cat in the cellar.

Emitting a sound very like "Grrrr!" but not actually that, the witch reluctantly lowered the child to the floor.

"It's that blasted U.P.S. fellow! Bloody, careless boob! Toots his fool head off out there like a lunatic, then dumps my parcels in the mud. Leaves them out there in the hot sun to go bad, he does. Deliberate, I know it's deliberate. Does it just to get my goat!" (In point of fact,

someone else had made off with her goat years before, but that's another matter entirely.) The witch uttered a few more grrrr-like noises, gave the pot a perfunctory stir, pinched the child's arm, then pinched it again for good measure, and shuffled slowly, in the approved fashion, toward the door. Halfway across the dim and dusty room, she paused and looked back at the child.

"Now, I don't want you moving, child, you hear? Not one step! Do you hear me?" She wagged a crooked finger at the little girl by way of punctuation.

"Yes'm," said the child, who looked for all the world as if she were unlikely ever to move again.

The witch grunted, squinted briefly but fiercely at the little girl, then resumed her interrupted shuffle toward the door.

Without looking back again, she angrily flung the door open. The hinges squealed in rusty protest and the door, none too sturdy to begin with and unused to such treatment, shivered and shook, as if in fright, when it slammed back hard against the wall. Muttering imprecations, as the witches' universal handbook recommends in situations such as this, the witch shuffled on out the doorway, across the broken step,

and down the weedy path to the gate by the road.

Behind her, the door slammed again.

The witch, her entire attention taken up with picking her way through the tangle of weeds that threatened to trip her at every step, with muttering imprecations, and with pulling every now and again at the tuft of hairs in the mole in the tip of her chin, missed it.

Were one inclined to be flip about what was really, you know, a very serious situation for all concerned, one might, with some justification, say that at this point in the affair, the child was, to borrow an apt expression from the field of sport, home free.

The witch, oblivious of her predicament, reached the leaning gate at last and there in the mud at her feet lay a package, its top bearing the familiar label from her regular supplier of squiggly things.

"Ruined!" cried the witch, her voice as sharp and piercing as her fingernails, when she saw the condition of the package. "Blast that U.P.S. fellow! Blast him! Oh, blast him!" Once again, one corner of the package had burst apart, it seemed, and a number of the squiggly things it had contained, whose destiny would otherwise have brought them to the witch's

stewpot, were already in the process of squiggling hurriedly away.

Moving faster than she had in centuries, the witch bent forward (she was already bent halfway forward to start with, you'll recall) and snatched at the squiggly things before they could completely effect their escape. Taking into account the witch's diminutive stature, it would be less than accurate to describe her state, just at the moment, as a towering rage, but she was plenty angry, make no mistake about it. Gathering up as many of the little squiggly things as she could catch, she transferred them all to one hand and picked up the broken package with the other. What with the slippery texture of the things themselves, and the arthritis that stiffened the old witch's fingers, she was not having an easy time of it, and it would be as well at this point if we decline to repeat, for the general ear, the awful things she cried out and the maledictions she promised to bring down on the head of the U.P.S. fellow.

The U.P.S. fellow, for his part, would have been shaken to his very boots, were this an ordinary occasion. But on this particular occasion, as it happens, he had concealed himself, unbeknownst to the witch, in the weeds of the yard. By

stretching up on tippy-toe, he could just catch a glimpse of her struggles with the squiggly things, while yet concealing himself from her view. The sight, it may truly be reported, pleased him just no end. He was actually smiling.

When finally the witch had hold of as many of the squiggly things as she could manage, she started the long and difficult shuffle back up the path to the door. And never mind what she said on the way.

Bent double as she was, and with her mind on other matters, she only learned that the door of the house—her very own house, her oh so comfy old house, made of all her favorite things, dried cabbage leaves and stale bagels and various odds and ends of cafeteria foods, otherwise unidentified—was closed, shut tight, when the top of her head went *thunk!*, very hard, against it. She staggered back a few steps and let out a yelp of pain. In the cellar, the cat cried, "Meooooow!" Flailing her arms to regain her balance, the witch dropped the remains of the broken package and the handful of squiggly things she'd been holding onto so carefully. The squiggly things, forewarned by their previous experience and now familiar with the terrain, lost not a moment in squiggling hastily into the

weeds and out of sight, every last one of them.

The witch reeled about dizzily in the yard for a minute or two before attaining a very shaky equilibrium. When she felt a little steadier on her feet, she ventured a few tentative steps toward the door. Stunned by the unexpected turn of events, she hesitated for a moment, but then, true to form, her witchy nature prevailed and she shrieked out some perfectly dreadful things. She was a sly one, you know, and she had needed only a moment's reflection to figure out that it was the pretty little child who had closed the door of her own house on her.

"Let me in this instant!" was the gist of her cries, together with various pronouncements on the child's nature, her past, and her probable future.

There was no reply from the house.

It was at this point that the witch realized that all of her squiggly things had made good their escape. Her rage, without exaggeration, knew no bounds.

When finally her throat grew hoarse from screeching, the witch fell silent except for the wheezing of her breath. In the near-silence then, she heard a sound—two words, actually—that chilled her to the bone. The words, in a voice that qua-

vered not at all, came from the other side of the door, her own door!

"Who's there?" said the voice, unmistakably that of the child, but changed, ominously different, transformed by the reversal of roles.

"Who's there?" the voice demanded again when the witch, momentarily startled into silence, didn't answer up quickly.

The witch would have answered up quickly enough that time, you can count on it, except that she was further surprised to find that her teeth were chattering with sudden cold, despite the otherwise warming rays of the sun. All this while, you see, all these thousands of years, it had been the steam from the bubbling stewpot, with its hideous gumbo of squiggly things, that had given her the only warmth she had ever known. Now, deprived of her stewpot—and even of her fresh supply of squiggly things, for the matter of that—she suddenly felt the cold pinching at her with fingers as merciless as

her own.

"Who's there?" the child's voice, positively stertorous by this juncture, demanded yet again.

"Me," the witch only just managed to whimper.

"Never heard of you!" snapped the voice of the child. "Go away! Beat it! Scram!"

Then there came a sound from the other side of the door that sent the worst shudder yet through the shivering body of the old witch. It was the sound of a heavy iron bar being slammed into place against the door. The dramatic effect of the sound was considerably enhanced by the fact that never, until now, had the door had such a bar to shut it so effectively. It was, all in all, a sound that the witch would have described as very—had she been more articulate just at the moment—*final*.

"Oh, my gosh!" said the witch.

"Meooooow!" said the cat.

"Heh, heh!" said the child.

"Toot, toot!" said the U.P.S. fellow.

FICTION

BUT WORDS WILL NEVER

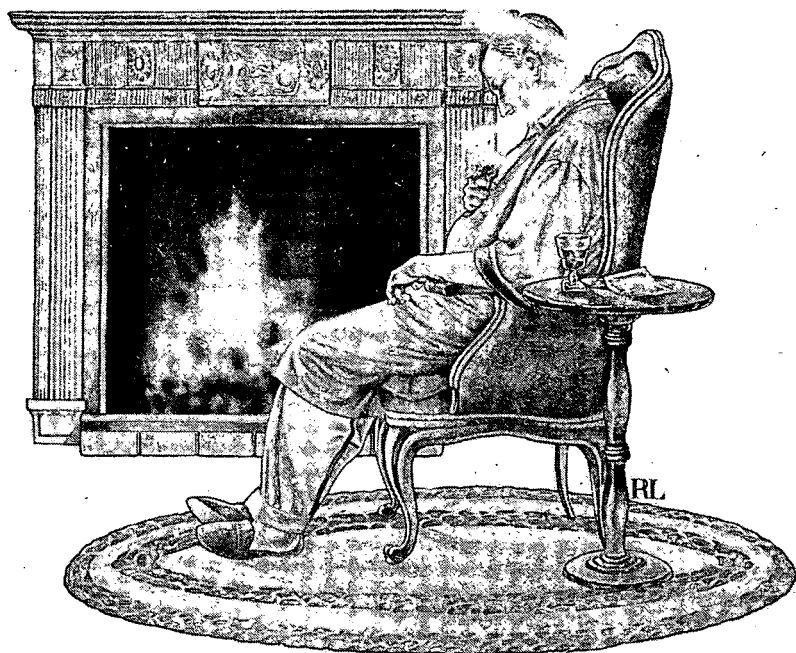


Illustration by Ray Lago

by Richard Dean

HURT ME

The old man slumped in the deep leather chair, his legs cocked stiffly at wide angles. One hand lay in his lap, the other was folded across his chest, still clenching the revolver.

An obvious suicide. Detective Kenneth Rabson knew that, but he wasn't going to let the obvious mislead him. Here was the whole story. Now he would have to break it down into a beginning, middle, and end—and do it before Stan Marvin arrived. Marvin was his superior and, Rabson liked to think, a real cop, a cop's cop. If he could just find out what was so important about this particular suicide that Marvin required his presence at one in the morning. . . . Just once he'd like to have the answers when Marvin asked the questions.

He stood by the doorway, surveying the high-ceilinged room, the shelves of leather-bound books that lined the walls from floor to ceiling, the dead fireplace, the heavy dark furniture, the ancient oak desk. He tried to imagine the room before it was overrun by the two men from the coroner's office, the four uniformed patrolmen who had answered the housekeeper's phone call, a police photographer, and the two ambulance attendants in thick blue parkas standing by with a collapsed stretcher. He tried to imagine the old man alone, sitting by the fire in his pajamas and robe, sipping brandy, reading a good book. What better way to spend a winter's night?

Except the old man apparently hadn't enjoyed it.

"Ken?" the police sergeant from downstairs interrupted. "Excuse me. The daughter just came home."

Rabson nodded, still concentrating on the scene, taking it apart, putting it back together again. "Let's keep her out of here, sergeant. I'll talk to her later."

"Gotcha."

The sergeant was barely through the doorway, however, when the commotion began.

"Let me in!" she demanded, pushing him out of the way. "I have every right to see him! You can't stop me!"

Rabson recognized her immediately as she rushed into the room. She stopped beside him, her breath caught in her throat. The color faded from her cheeks and she seemed to age instantly far beyond her thirty-plus years. He thought she might fall, but her eyes sparkled and she steadied herself.

"Ms. Hart?" he asked. "Diane Hart?"

She glanced at him, then back at the body. "Yes." She let out the breath she had been holding and turned away, canvassing the room as she spoke. "Do you know me? Don't tell me police officers read poetry these days."

Only the presence of the body in the chair kept him from smiling. "Yes, it's true. This one, anyway. I'm Kenneth Rabson. Detective Kenneth Rabson."

The name brought no recognition to her face, but she did look at him for the first time. Her eyes plunged into him so fiercely that he found the sight of the corpse more welcoming. It was only for a moment, but when she too turned toward the body he almost sighed with relief.

"There are some questions I need to ask you, if you don't mind," he said. "Mr. Lund was your father?"

"Yes," she answered.

"And Hart is—"

"I was married once," she explained curtly. "Very briefly, thank God, when I was young. It was a suicide?"

"Yes, I think. Clearly so. Was he upset lately, depressed over anything?"

"I wouldn't know," she said, still viewing the corpse. "We rarely spoke."

"But you lived here?"

"I've lived in this house my entire life. My father and I are—we

were both intensely private persons. We often went without speaking to each other for weeks at a time. You're sure it was suicide?"

"I'm not sure of anything, Ms. Hart, but it seems obvious. Why? Would you suspect anything else?"

"You mean murder?" Again her eyes disturbed him. "No, I don't suppose so. He had very few friends and certainly no enemies. It took the back of his head off, didn't it?"

"Yes, it did. Doesn't that bother you, seeing him like this?"

"I don't know. He's dead now. It really isn't him any more." The eyes flashed defiantly. "What about you? Does it bother you?"

"Some. Yes."

"I suppose you're used to it, though, aren't you, Officer—"

"Rabson. Detective Rabson. It's something you never really get used to."

"Do you mind if I look closer?" she asked bluntly. She took a step toward the body, then another. A sheen of sweat beaded onto her forehead.

"How long have you been a cop?" she asked, her voice softer now, a little shaky. "You seem quite young."

Rabson welcomed the change. "I'm twenty-eight. I've been on the force almost three years."

"And already a detective. You must be good."

"I began as a detective. I have a master's degree in criminology. And one in English literature."

"Really? That's certainly an odd combination." She was standing directly behind the chair, the body out of sight. He couldn't help but notice the similarity in the father's and daughter's faces. Both chins tended toward a point, giving them a pinched, shrewish look, selfish.

"I was a great reader when I was a kid and I really couldn't think of anything else to major in," he replied. "Believe it or not, I reread some Sherlock Holmes and decided to become a cop. You know, I saw you read once. On campus."

She swept around the far side of the chair, careful not to look down at the body. "I don't suppose you were one of those rancid hippie-types who used to sit up front and frown knowingly."

"Yes, well—I guess I was," he admitted. He tried not to be offended, but she was right on target. On the other hand, she wasn't all that great a poet. There had been a lot to frown about.

She stood by the fireplace and he joined her, cautiously, keeping his distance.

"How did he do it?" she asked, forcing herself to look again. "He was sitting here and—"

"If you look at it," he began, pleased to be official again, "he was sitting here, reading a book. There was a fire in the fireplace at the time and he was sipping brandy. At some point, he put his book down, got up, went to the desk, took the revolver from the lower right-hand drawer, which he left open, returned to his chair and—"

"He placed the gun in his mouth," she interrupted. "And pulled the trigger."

"Yes," he said, watching her carefully, surprised. She had wanted to say it, and seemed to enjoy saying it. "Of course, we don't know how much time elapsed between when he stopped reading and the time of death. He might have sat here for several hours, put more wood on the fire, drunk several glasses of brandy." He paused. "That's it, though. That's what's got me."

"What's that?"

He paced in front of the chair. "It just isn't done that way. To sit comfortably in a favorite chair, enjoy a drink and a fire and a book and then blow—commit suicide. It seems like the way to do it, but premeditated suicides never happen like that. It's always in the bathroom, the garage, in the car parked on a quiet road. The violent ones, I mean. And there's no note."

"I don't see what you mean," she said.

He stopped, shook his head, and went closer to the body. "It's as though he acted very suddenly, like a man who comes home from the office a bit early and finds his wife with his best friend and just shoots himself rather than having to deal with it." He picked up the book that lay open, its binding cracked, on the lampstand by the chair. It was a cheap paperback with a lurid cover. *Sticks and Stones*, A Novel of Suspense, by Charles Haughtry. "A murder mystery. Must be a terribly boring book. You know, my wife—"

"What makes you think it's terrible?" she asked, concerned.

"Well, obviously he wasn't even interested enough to find out the who-done-it." He looked at the open page. "Page sixty-four. If I were going to kill myself I wouldn't begin a book like this. I don't suppose it would really matter, but if I did begin, I'd have to go ahead and finish it. Otherwise, I'd never know how it came out. You see? But if something interrupted him, caught him off guard—"

She plucked the book from his hands. "Just because the book

was lying open there doesn't mean he was reading it right then, does it? If you look, I'm sure you'll find books open all over the house. He might have been reading it last week."

"I suppose you could be right," he agreed, puzzling over it. "But somehow I think it fits. It's part of the whole."

"Rabson?"

They both looked up. Detective Stan Marvin followed his ponderous beer-belly into the room.

"Stan," Rabson greeted him. "This is Ms. Diane Hart, Mr. Lund's daughter."

They nodded at each other. Marvin greeted the other cops, joked briefly with the photographer, and quickly examined the body.

"Looks pretty clean, doesn't it?" he told Rabson. "Any note?"

"None," Rabson said.

"Damn. I was hoping for a note. A confession, actually."

"Confession?" Rabson asked.

"I had a run-in with the old guy once. You woulda been busy bein' born about then, I guess. My first big case. Not my case, exactly—I was still in uniform then—but the first homicide I ever worked on. If it was homicide, and I think it was. And that young lady was about this tall." He held his hand at waist level.

"What happened?" Rabson asked.

"Missing persons. Two of them. Very unusual circumstances. We had old Lund here pinned, it looked like, on a porno rap. He was putting out a few blue books every year, probably what kept his business alive."

"He was a pornographer?" Rabson was amazed.

"He was a publisher," Ms. Hart answered. She had been straining to listen. "They were art books."

"Not the ones I saw," Marvin told her.

"He published all sorts of books," she went on defensively. "Nothing against him was ever proved. It was false arrest and he would have beat it in court."

"Yes, ma'am," Marvin said. "But he had been convicted once before. On the east coast."

"For importing *Tropic of Cancer*. It's considered a classic."

"Yes, ma'am," Marvin agreed. "I've read it myself. But the law saw it different back then. And there was the warehouse." He saw she was going to interrupt and held up his hands. "I know, I know. It wasn't much of a case. An empty warehouse and a few scraps of damaged magazines. We were doing a job. Nowadays, well, you

can get worse than that just a few blocks from here, over the counter with your pop and candy. Still, ma'am, the law's the law. And then," he said to Rabson, "the wife disappeared. And the nanny."

The photographer had finished and the ambulance attendants moved in with their stretcher. The four uniformed cops were filing out the door, pulling cigarette packs from their pockets, their conversation turning to basketball scores.

"It had that smell to it, Rabson," Marvin went on. Diane Hart was watching the attendants manuever the already stiffening body out of the chair. "A good cop's got a nose for it, you know. When something just don't feel right. She was a lady. A real Lady, I mean, from England and all that. He was a student on one of them scholarships, they fell in love, got married in spite of her parents. It was her money bought this place. She did a lot of social work, the church, the hospital, ladies' clubs, very highly respected in the community. Anyway, she had a nervous breakdown when the shi—when it all came out in the papers. Some of the boys in Vice got the feeling she might have went to our side. Then—poof!—gone off the face of the earth."

They watched the sad, disappointed face disappear beneath a white sheet. They stood back as the attendants wheeled the body out of the room, then followed them down the stairs to the front door. Diane Hart went with them.

"I don't know," Marvin said, shaking his head, rubbing his whiskered chin. "He was an educated man. Not the kind you'd expect to kill somebody, but if he did, well, I guess it was the perfect crime. We were close, so close you could almost touch it, but we never got within a hundred miles of him. And now, dammit, I guess we'll never know."

She held the front door open for them. Rabson was surprised at the meekness with which she had listened to Marvin's accusations, her eyes downcast.

He wanted to talk with her some more.

"Wouldn't you rather stay with friends tonight?" he asked her. "I'm on my way home. I'd be glad to give you a lift."

"No, thanks," she told him, smiling politely, her voice firm. "I'll be just fine. Do you think I should be afraid of ghosts? No, this is my home, too. I'll be just fine."

A cold wind swept into the hallway. It had started to snow. Rabson and Marvin bundled their overcoats around them and did not linger.

An hour later, she was in bed beneath a warm down comforter, a cup of tea with cream and honey steaming on the table next to her. She flipped slowly through the pages of Charles Haughtry's *Sticks and Stones*. She stopped at page sixty-four and began reading. . . .

since the brutal scream had awakened her? Ten? Fifteen? An hour? She breathed for the first time since that raw, terrified noise had broken her dreams.

She opened her eyes and a strange light flickered across her room, sending the shadows racing and swelling eerily on the walls.

But Kathryn was never one to be afraid of the dark. She was only four, but no hobgoblins were ever going to get to her. She climbed out of bed and ran to the window.

He was carrying a lantern and it was swinging back and forth and it was like a dream. Mother was riding in a wheelbarrow and he was pushing her. She was wearing her new fur coat like a blanket and in her lap she was holding a shovel and an axe.

It looked like a game that Mommy and Daddy were playing. She ran downstairs and outside and followed them through the. . .

She didn't turn the page. He hadn't bothered to either, and he'd missed out on what happened in the woods behind the house, twice, and how little Kathryn had hidden in the bushes when he'd come calling her name and had fallen asleep and how it seemed like a bad, bad dream she couldn't quite remember until much later, on page one hundred seventy-nine, when she was much older and had learned not to be afraid of the boogeymen who hid in the deepest shadows of her mind.

She let the book fall onto her lap and leaned back into the pillows, the taut determination draining from her face. She sighed and closed her eyes. She would write her editor in the morning, she thought. The Charles Haughtry series could stop now.

Rabson let himself in quietly, removed his overcoat and shoes, and tiptoed down the hallway of his small apartment. A light was burning in the living room.

"You're still awake?" he asked.

His wife was curled up in a ragged but comfortable old armchair, a book in her hands. "I was just finishing this."

He smiled self-consciously. "Carol, it's only the fifth time you've read it."

"I know," she said, closing the book. "I just can't get used to it, reading it in print." He couldn't help glancing again at the yellow and blue dust-jacket, especially below the title where it read, "A Police Mystery by Kenneth Rabson."

He had always wanted to write a novel. He'd tried a million times, beginning in junior high and all the way through college, but nothing ever worked. Then, just as he was finishing his master's thesis, just for fun he'd reread some of his childhood favorites. *Winnie-the-Pooh*, *Treasure Island*, *Sherlock Holmes*. And that was when he got the idea that sent him on to the police academy, and then back to the university. And, sure enough, after a year on the force he'd gathered enough material to write a detective novel.

It was selling well and he was proud of himself, but, nonetheless, as he looked around the room, the chairs and tables and shelves and every available surface piled high with books, small slopes of them spilling out from the corners, he reminded himself that there were a lot of good books in the world far better than his. And a lot better cops.

"You going straight to bed?" Carol asked him.

"Not just yet," he said, loosening his tie. "Do you remember that sleazy, blood-and-gore guy you used to read? Wasn't his name Charles Haughtry?"

"Mmmm, yeah," she said, shivering. "He wasn't that bad, Ken. Just frightening, edge-of-your-chair, nightmare kind of stuff. The guy's definitely got a warped mind."

"Do we still have him?"

"Sure," she said. "What do you want to do? Scare yourself to sleep?"

She got up and dug through a pile of paperbacks in one corner of the room and came back with four of them.

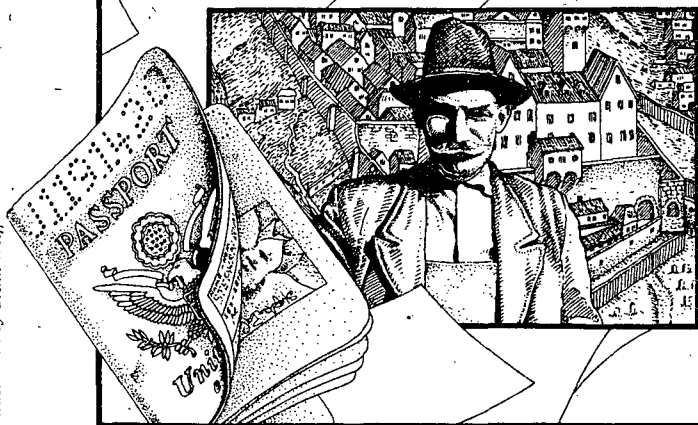
One was *Sticks and Stones*. He sat down at his desk, pushed his typewriter and the manuscript pages of what would be his second novel out of the way. He turned to page sixty-four. It would be interesting to see what the suicidal mind of Mr. Augustus Lund had last read. He stopped, though, and went back to page one. He wanted to get the whole story. He liked it better that way, when things had a beginning, middle, and end.

FICTION

THE CURSE OF ISTVAN KODALY

By Alec Ross

Illustration by Glenn Wolff



D*ejà vu* is the name given to the feeling that you have experienced something before. I never really believed in it. I guess I'm just a down-to-earth kind of person who doesn't hold with any of the so-called psychic phenomena that lots of people seem to want to believe in.

The reason I'm telling you this is that something happened to me that makes me stop and wonder if I've been too hasty about my lack of belief in things out of the ordinary.

My name is Stefan Balint, and I'm Hungarian. Or at least I'm of Hungarian descent. My father was given the same name and so was his father before him. I was the first of my line to be born in this country. My father was the first to come here, and when he was settled in, he sent for his mother and father. Before you could shake the paprika, as they say in Budapest, the Balints were Americans.

Well, most of the Balints were Americans. Grandpa never quite made it. Oh, he was glad to be living here, all right, but he didn't want to cope with the problems of a new world. He wouldn't learn English because if he had he would have had to use it. "Hungarian has been good enough for me all these years. I'm not going to desert it now," he would say, or at least that's a pretty fair English approximation of what he really said.

Listening to Grandpa was one of my delights. I was never conscious of being bilingual. I just somehow managed to follow what he said and to respond to him in Hungarian. When you're young, learning a language is no big deal. You don't know any better so it just happens naturally.

I would always ask Grandpa to tell me about the curse that was put on him back in Budapest in the old days. And Grandpa would sigh and shiver, and with intense drama in his voice he would tell me the story. I couldn't get enough of it, and I would enlarge upon it with my friends, and we would all play out the curse instead of cowboys and Indians.

The curse was hurled down upon Grandpa's head by his old friend Istvan Kodaly. (Grandpa had grown up with him.) The center of the situation was, of course, a woman, the woman who later became my grandmother. Istvan had wanted her for his wife, and when she chose Grandpa instead, Istvan was very upset. He called down the curse upon the Balints "unto the tenth generation." Nobody

paid much attention to it, curses being out of style at the time, but it was remembered years later when my father sent word for his parents to join him in America. Somehow or other, Grandpa's passport disappeared just before the journey was to begin. Then in quick order his visa was lost and his plane ticket. "It's the curse come round at last," cried all the relatives, but then that's what one expects assorted cousins and uncles and aunts to say, so Grandpa didn't pay any attention to their voices of doom. Even though his departure was delayed for a long time, Grandpa just blamed the missing documents on his own carelessness or nervousness. He had learned to ignore Istvan Kodaly long, long ago.

***I would ask Grandpa about the curse that
was put on him back in Budapest.
And Grandpa would sigh and shiver...***

Throughout the years in his new home, any time something went wrong, which was at least daily in the early days of adjusting to a new world, Grandpa would laughingly blame all disasters on the curse. When my father lost his job, when my younger brother was in an accident in his car, when I flunked geometry, when any of us got sick, it was always the curse that was blamed. That was good. Things were never our fault. Always it was the Kodaly curse that was at the root of the trouble. As a result, I never had to take the burden of blame for anything I did or didn't do. It was a delightful way to live. And so I grew up with a touch of drama in my life. After all, ours was the only curse on the block and it was worth taking pride in.

When I graduated from college, my present from my family was a long dreamed of trip to Europe with, of course, special emphasis on Hungary. I admit I was curious about seeing the sights and meeting the remaining relatives, and so, loaded with greetings and messages from Grandpa and Papa, I set off to conquer the old world that neither parents nor grandparents had ever gone back to visit.

I had a marvelous time. The relatives were much nicer than I

had expected, the countryside was more beautiful than I had dreamed, and the cost was deliciously less than I had feared. My Hungarian came back in practically no time, and I knew I was going to miss everything and everyone when I left. Well, I haven't left yet, and I may never go home. But that's not through choice, you understand. I blame it all on Istvan Kodaly.

The loss of my passport the day before I was to leave Budapest didn't really bother me too much. It was an inconvenience, of course, but, after all, we have an embassy in Budapest, and all I had to do was apply to the U. S. Consul for a temporary passport to get me home. Losing the replacement, however, was more of a burden, and I began to think that I was simply about to enter a period of bad luck. I've had those before, but I was calm because they eventually sort themselves out and everything gets back to normal.

I didn't really do any worrying until my airplane ticket disappeared, and while I was searching high and low for that, my wallet also vanished from its usual place. Something about this whole sequence of events began to seem very familiar to me, but as I hadn't ever been in a similar situation, I put it all down to nervousness. I didn't know whether to blame my troubles on my own stupidity (always easy) or some outside agency (the relatives recommended that).

The real panic began setting in when the consular office indicated that I would need some proof of my U. S. citizenship. With all my papers missing, I wasn't able to provide that documentation. To add insult to injury, on my way back to my hotel from the consulate, I was stopped by the Budapest police, who demanded to see my papers. Their excuse was that a dangerous criminal was loose in the area.

Now, one of the great things about being an American at home is that you can go everywhere and do anything within reason without having any papers. But in Hungary, without a passport I was obviously a criminal type, and so I ended up in the local police station where I was given a chance to explain my situation.

I couldn't have asked for nicer treatment. The people I talked to were as polite as could be, and when I was thrown into the pokey they were relatively gentle about it. I can't blame them, really. I was probably the only person in all of Budapest without any iden-

tification at all. Everything I owned in the way of significant paper was missing.

The consulate refused to accept my calls, the jailer didn't believe my story, my relatives were keeping as low a profile as they could by refusing to recognize my existence, and no one would allow me to write a letter or make an overseas telephone call.

I lost track of time after a while, but I estimate that after a week or so, I was finally sent for and put face to face with the top man.

"You say you are Stefan Balint?"

"I am."

"Can you prove it?"

"I've lost all my papers—passport, plane ticket, wallet with identification."

"Then how do I know that you are who you say you are?" While I had not allowed myself to panic before, I now was ready to scream the place down.

"Can't you take my word for it?"

"Why should I?"

Now, you have to admit that his question was reasonable. I accepted that, but it didn't help my situation any.

"We will have to hold you in protective custody until your identity is established."

"How can that be done?"

"You will have to regain your papers—all of them." His voice was positive, allowing for no argument.

"I wish to speak with the U. S. Consul and call my home in Chicago."

"Nonsense," he asserted. "This is not the crime capital of the world. We do not indulge prisoners here. If your papers are turned in, we will notify you. Until that time, you will remain here."

Here was a rather moldy jail cell, and I was not looking forward to spending any more time in it. He started to leave, and I interrupted his departure. "Who are you?"

"I am the Head of the Security Police. My name is Istvan Kodaly."

Istvan Kodaly. The name of the man who had put the curse on Grandpa. Evidently, the closer to Budapest a Balint was, the stronger the curse. At that point I knew beyond any doubt that I would never regain my papers. Grandpa had overcome the curse by sneaking over the border, but I couldn't do that while I was

locked up in a jail cell. It may not have been *déjà vu*, but it was close enough.

Three days of banging steadily on the bars of my cage finally resulted in my gaining another interview with the Head of Security Police.

"Was it your father or grandfather who put the curse on my family?" I asked without pausing for any polite generalities.

"My grandfather," he replied. "But surely you don't believe in that kind of old woman's nonsense?"

"It seems to work, so it can't be nonsense."

"It only works on Hungarians. You claim to be an American. If you really were an American, you wouldn't be cursed." He was apparently convinced of the logic of his position.

As he went over the same ground about my identity, I was busy planning a way out.

"If you don't believe in the curse," I said, "then you should be willing to help me remove it."

He agreed to indulge me, largely, I felt, because he was embarrassed over what could prove to be an international incident.

"You have an idea for negating the curse?" he asked.

"Yes," I answered quickly. "Write it down, and I'll try to reverse it."

He gave an indulgent smile, yet he took out a notebook and wrote for a minute. He handed me the paper, but before I could read what he had written, the paper disappeared. One minute it was there, but as I put out my hand to take it, it was gone.

"Interesting," Kodaly admitted.

"Yes." My voice was emotionless. I was determined not to allow myself to shiver.

"Do you know anything about removing curses?" He might almost have been asking if I knew how to stop the rain.

"No," I admitted, "but a talent for curses is supposed to run in our blood." I didn't know if that was really true, but as my grandmother used to say when she urged us to do or not to do something, "How could it hurt?"

I could see that Kodaly really was interested in what was happening, or not happening as the case may be, and we smoked two of his dreadful Hungarian cigarettes quietly for a few minutes.

"Just what does the curse involve?" he finally asked.

"It seems to deal only with paper," I said. "Is there such a thing as a paper curse?"

"If there wasn't before, there is now," he said. "Let's try something." He reached into a folder on his desk and removed a sheet of paper which he slid over to me. "Here is your confession about your career as a spy. Sign it and let's see what happens."

Now of all the things I have never been in my life, a spy is right up there at the top along with Hollywood sex symbol and Olympic decathlon winner. I certainly wasn't going to risk signing a confession because if the curse really wasn't centered on paper I would be doomed forever. I tried to stall for time: "Surely you wouldn't mind if I read it first?"

A flash of victory appeared in his eyes. "Certainly read it. The details of your treachery to the state are all included."

I pulled the sheet of paper toward me. Just as I lifted it to reading level, it disappeared. There's no other way to say it. One minute it was there and the next minute it was gone and I was trying to pick up empty air.

We both looked at the space the paper had occupied, and then, foolishly, we looked up, down, around—all over the office for a clue to what had become of the confession. There was a long silence and we smoked some more. I was beginning to get used to the Hungarian cigarettes.

"It is a paper curse," Kodaly said softly. "This bears out the stories your grandfather used to tell before he sneaked over the border. Not that anybody ever believed him," he added quickly.

"It must only work within the borders of Hungary." I was thinking aloud. "Maybe I'll get back all my papers if I leave Hungarian soil."

Kodaly nodded his head sagely. "Possibly. However, you cannot leave Hungarian soil without your papers. That is the law." We both thought for a long time.

"I don't suppose," I began, and he shook his head. "I didn't really think so," I said, and we smoked some more.

Back in my cell I was still sufficiently interested in the other-worldliness of the whole affair that I didn't allow myself to fall into what I once read is called the slough of despond. Surely there was a way out. Surely superior American know-how could solve this whole mess. I thought about Hungarians I had known. I thought

about my family. I thought about Grandpa. And then I had an idea. I stopped speaking Hungarian. If the curse only worked on Hungarians, then I would be American all the way.

I refused to understand what the guards said to me when they brought me my meals. And when I was led off to another interview with Kodaly, I refused to understand his greetings and his questions.

His English was rudimentary, and in desperation he had to bring in an interpreter to whom I announced that I was an all-American victim of an eastern bloc bureaucracy. "I do not understand why I am being detained here. If this matter is not settled at once, there will be serious international repercussions."

Kodaly's eyes registered admiration at the cleverness of my ploy. "Maybe it will work," he murmured. The interpreter looked puzzled, and Kodaly gestured for him to leave the room. Kodaly took a small notebook out of his pocket and wrote for a minute or two. "Yes, maybe it will work," he repeated. He handed me the slip of paper, and I started to read aloud what it said: "Istvan Kodaly called down a curse upon the name of Stefan Balint . . ." And just then the sheet of paper disappeared.

Kodaly roared with laughter. "Ah, you're too smart for your own good. You were reading Hungarian. Pretending not to understand is not going to counter an authentic curse."

I was furious with myself. I had almost had it. The curse was almost on the run, and then I had to spoil things by being too anxious.

It's been three months now, and I'm still trying to think of some other approach. Istvan is thinking, too, and strangely enough we have come to be quite good friends. We spend a lot of time together, whenever he's not busy chasing down spies or something like that. I've taught him to play gin rummy while we wait for inspiration. Unfortunately, the score sheet keeps disappearing, and at times the cards themselves seem to be very pale and thin. It's the plastic coating that saves them from total destruction or whatever, I guess.

Yesterday I overheard two of the guards talking in the corridor outside my cell. They revealed two interesting bits of information. First, there is a rumor that Budapest is running out of paper. And second, the jail will probably soon be quite full. There is to be a gypsy encampment just outside the city, and the arrest rate is

always higher when gypsies are around.

Gypsies: Now there's a possible solution for me. If anybody knows anything about hurling and removing curses it's gypsies. Just as soon as I get a Magyar cellmate I intend to request a professional consultation with him. If he will remove the curse, I will pay him with all my missing Hungarian paper money. How could it hurt?



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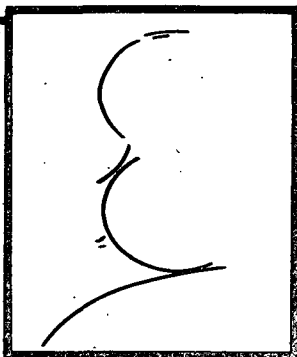


Toshiro Mifune in *The Challenge*.

Copyright © 1982 by Embassy Pictures.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by Peter Shaw



The exotic conventions of the Japanese samurai movie have made it highly successful as an export. In fact, Americans have shown such an affinity for the form that Toshiro Mifune, the star of *Seven Samurai*, *Rashomon*, and *Yojimbo*, has previously made samurai movies with Americans Lee Marvin and Richard Boone. (Mifune has also appeared in American movies such as *The Battle of Midway* and *Hell in the Pacific* and in the television miniseries *Shōgun*). This time, in **The Challenge**, he is paired with Scott Glenn, a Clint Eastwood type best known for his action role in *Urban Cowboy*.

Glenn is an American pug boxer who can take a punch. He

gets himself mixed up in a Japanese family quarrel over—what else?—two ancient samurai swords. He picks Mifune's side, which looks like the sure loser inasmuch as its warriors are armed with ancient weapons and opposed by a foe carrying submachine guns. Mifune, though, has a beautiful daughter, played by newcomer Donna Kei Benz, and that seems to make it worth taking a chance on her dad.

Like most samurai movies, not to mention *Rocky I*, *Rocky II*, and *Rocky III*, the training period drags a bit. We know that a boxer doesn't stand a chance against Japanese kendo, kenjutsu, karate, and aikido, but we have to watch as Scott Glenn has this elementary fact

banged into his head. Once he has learned his martial arts, though, he and Mifune can take on the challenge prepared by Mifune's evil brother: electronic security devices, armed guards, and murderous henchmen holding Mifune's daughter hostage.

The hand to hand fighting is the kind that will force many to look away from the blood, of which there is far too much (clearly the reason for the "R" rating). But the old formula still works: it's impossible not to start rooting for the underdogs as they take on superior numbers and superior armaments with bow and arrow, darts, and samurai swords, plus the submachine gun that Glenn has the happy inspiration to grab from one of the foe. Director John Frankenheimer (*The Birdman of Alcatraz*, *French Connection II*, *Seven Days in May*) is stepping down in class for this one. But he is still a great hand at quick no-nonsense exposition, crowd scenes, chases, and fights. And if you happen to be planning a trip to Japan, his roving camera offers a colorful travelogue into the bargain.

According to the newspaper, the United States has never succeeded in placing an undercover agent inside the Soviet Union. Clint Eastwood not only

pulls off this trick, but he succeeds as well in stealing and flying home the **Firefox** aircraft, a plane so advanced that we will be lost if we fail to get a look at its anti-radar devices.

It takes Clint two hours and ten minutes to complete his mission, which seems a bit long even for him. But he does manage the entire business—which he also produced and directed—on a "PG" rating.

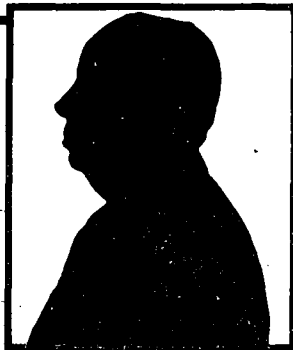
STILL PLAYING

A combination of forties detective thriller and futuristic fantasy, **Blade Runner** is at least half successful. Harrison Ford and Sean Young are routinely familiar as the cynical detective and the beautiful, mysterious lady (she turns out to be an android) that he falls in love with. The backdrop, though, Los Angeles in 2019, has its surprises.

The city of the future is a triumph of technical realization—a routine accomplishment for sf movies these days, to be sure. But it also provides a convincingly chilling version of a future not too far away from us. The spectacular high rise buildings above, and the all-too-believable physical and social decay teeming beneath them, make this movie worth seeing.

FRAMES OF REFERENCE

by Peter Christian



Superbly in control, sneering his superiority, the urbane murderer has taken the lead in many mysteries on the screen, surrendering his command only at the finish. In the last issue of AHMM, we surveyed a few of this aristocratic breed, often so much more dashing and accomplished than the heroes. Villains seem often to come from good stock, and the movies' stock of villains seemed endless. Of course. For without them and their machinations, where would the mystery melodrama be?

Evildoing can come in all sizes. Walter Slezak, for instance, has for decades created menace on the screen by using his imposing bulk against punier heroes pitted against him. His villainy has been impressive. In his very first English-speaking role, in *Once Upon a Honeymoon*, the Austrian-born actor plays a Chamberlain-like diplomat hopscooting through Europe espousing peace in the days before World War II; curiously, no sooner does he leave each hapless country, than Hitler's armies march in. In his travels, the diplomat meets and marries an American showgirl, Ginger Rogers, and attracts the attention of an American reporter, Cary Grant, who ultimately proves his downfall. In Alfred Hitchcock's *Lifeboat*, Slezak is a German U-boat officer stranded on a floundering lifeboat in mid-Atlantic with a handful of survivors from an Allied ship his sub has just sunk; as the others quarrel amongst themselves, he takes command. But Slezak's most riveting role in war-

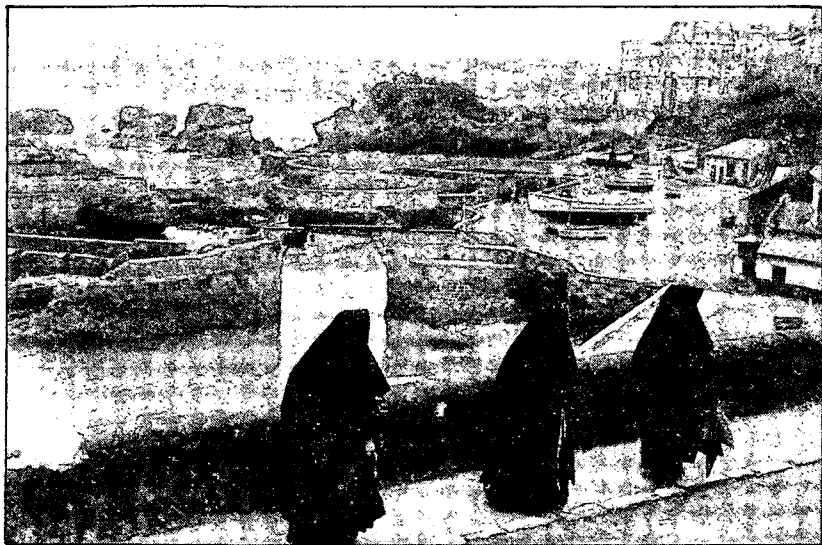
time movies was the menacing one he played in Dorothy B. Hughes' *The Fallen Sparrow*. In the film, John Garfield plays a veteran of the International Brigade and a survivor of a Spanish internment camp, haunted by nightmares of a limping commandant who tortured him for months before his escape. Garfield is now in New York, but still senses the man he called "Wobble-foot" not far away, tracking him for a medallion which was once the brigade's rallying cry. At a party for refugees, Garfield is introduced to an affable aristocrat (Slezak) in a wheelchair—and we make the link between the crippled count and the clubfooted torturer long before Garfield does.

Slezak played quite a few other villains, all with a smouldering sense of evil that was quite unique on the screen. In *Sinbad the Sailor* he is a feared, legendary plunderer; in *Riff-Raff*, a postwar melodrama with a South American locale, he is an amiable criminal who sketches benignly as his thugs beat up Pat O'Brien.

Other erudite villainy by accomplished actors comes to mind. Charles Boyer, rarely sinister on the screen, in *Gaslight* is the urbane husband who is slowly driving his nervous wife insane by dimming lights and other night frights. Charles Laughton, as the powerful publisher in *The Big Clock*, nearly manages to divert blame for a murder on a hapless Ray Milland, unfortunate enough to be seen leaving the apartment of Laughton's paramour just after she has been killed. Smooth as silk, seemingly above suspicion, the crafty Laughton parries Milland at every turn as the latter, now a fugitive, desperately seeks both refuge and clues in the office building housing both Laughton's publishing empire and the enormous art deco clock which plays a part in the drama's finish. More recently, any catalogue of true wickedness on the screen cannot omit Kirk Douglas's chilling delineation of evil personified: the mass murderer in *The List of Adrian Messenger*. Suave and impeccable, he comments on the nature of evil in a little speech which freezes the blood.

The range of villainy is wide. It can stretch from the wicked Captain Hook, nemesis of lost boys, to the scheming but debonair Rupert von Hentzau of *The Prisoner of Zenda*, plotting to seize the throne of Ruritania. It can encompass Sweeney Todd, lovingly sharpening his barber's razor, and the imperious Mrs. Danvers terrorizing the new young wife already frightened by the ghost of the imperious *Rebecca*. Salute the villains, in all their variety; they are our spice.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Cartier-Bresson/Magnum

Is everything in this picture all it seems to be? We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, N.Y., N.Y. 10017.

NOTE: We regret that in the printing process the credit line for the September photograph was lost. The photograph was by Alvin Langdon Coburn and was reprinted by the courtesy of the Permanent Collection at the International Center of Photography, Gift of June Sidman, 1130 Fifth Avenue, N.Y., N.Y. 10028. ED.

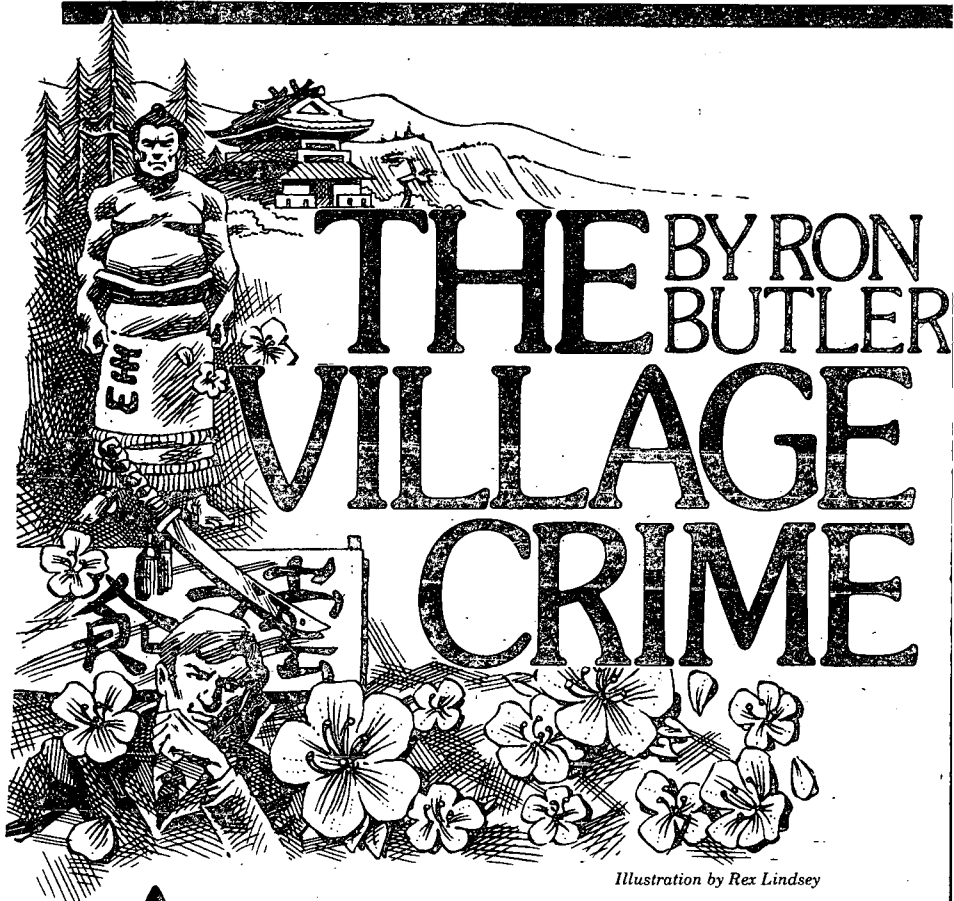


Illustration by Rex Lindsey

A long with the delicate blossoms of plum and cherry which would soon draw the people of Okayama to Korakuen Park by the thousands, bonus time was also approaching, and I was gritting my teeth as I tried to work out the complicated

formula for determining extra pay.

Of all the many traditions in Japan, I sometimes thought the bonus system was the most difficult for me to grasp. Most of the major companies pay three of them a year, the smallest in spring and the largest before the end of December, when old

debts must be paid. They're based on a percentage of annual salary, a bit added for total employment time, and a little something extra the union asks as a matter of course.

The union was no problem. Goto-san, my chief clerk and loyal friend, headed that group, and I expected no more than a routine request for wage boosts to match inflation.

What bothered me was the secret bonus, something I had been ignorant of previously. Many Japanese men, I learned, expect cash that doesn't wind up in the family checking account. It usually goes for entertaining friends—a night or two out with the boys in grand style. My particular difficulty was whether to pay this bonus to the women as well. If the men found out, would they be offended? And would the women be willing to intrude upon such a traditionally male realm of Japanese economics?

I called out for Goto-san and Miss Namba, the tall, slim woman in charge of the growing staff involved with the billing and the warranty departments of our computer hardware firm. I explained that I was thinking of paying the secret bonus for both the men and the women this year.

Goto-san's face couldn't have looked much different if he happened to see an *obake* floating toward him in a clump of willows on a moonless night, or, if not a legless ghost, at least a madman attacking with a sword. Namba-san, ordinarily the epitome of composure and efficiency, blushed, stammered, and bowed her way out of my office—backwards.

For the next few minutes, I sat behind my battleship-gray metal desk staring at my new brass nameplate, the one in Japanese characters that was supposed to give my name as Sam Brent, but which was usually transformed verbally to Sommu Bulentu. While I was waiting for the clock to give me an excuse to leave the scene of my dilemma, Police Inspector Toshihiko Ueki walked in, carrying his jacket folded over one arm, and, except for the holstered revolver on his right hip, looking like an ordinary businessman.

"It would appear," he said with a casual glance in my direction, "that you are involved in some complex business problem." My father-in-law took a seat on one of the twin sofas arranged in front of my desk.

I explained the matter of the extra bonus, and Ueki laughed.

"If your concerns are no greater than how to justify paying more money, I have a suggestion."

"Yeah?"

"Let us take our families to visit some of my relatives in the country. I have the weekend and Monday off." He went through his pockets in search of a cigarette, and finally gave up with a disappointed look. "A trip away from the city may help restore tranquillity to your soul."

I reflected on the hectic pace of business during the winter months, then gazed out the window at the veil of clouds covering the mountain peaks to the north. "You know, Toshihiko, this sounds like one of your better ideas."

Our destination was a village near Daisen, some seventy-five kilometers northwest of Okayama in Tottori Prefecture. It was a pleasant trip, although the two-lane highways can be harrowing on the hairpin mountain curves. In the rearview mirror, I could see Inspector Ueki and his wife, Hanako, contentedly watching the scenery, and from time to time Noriko and her mother pointed out sites of interest: a shrine to a local deity, a Samurai's grave, a small town

famous for rice crackers, and the many classic examples of rural architecture, in a framework of orchards, fast-running streams, and the geometric designs formed by small farms and garden plots.

At noon, Mrs. Ueki untied four bundles, and my mouth watered at the thought of a Japanese box lunch, consisting, this time, of sushi, strips of grilled fish, and small pickled plums on rice. Noriko considerably offered me tidbits with her chopsticks as I concentrated on clutch, brake, and accelerator. By mid-afternoon, with a mellow gold sun still high in the azure spring sky, we arrived at Daisen.

Inspector Ueki leaned forward and tapped me on the shoulder. "If it is not too much trouble, Sam, will you please stop at the police station for a moment?"

Mrs. Ueki made a clucking sound. "You promised, Uekisan, not to think of police matters while we are on holiday."

"Ah, this is merely a friendly call." He picked up a neatly-wrapped parcel from the floor. "Makoto Suzuki and I were at Hiroshima University together. I have not seen him since he joined the force at Daisen, and wish to take him

a small gift from Okayama."

"*Hai, hai, hai,*" Mrs. Ueki said. Oh, yes, sure. I found the police station and parked in back.

The inspector returned a few minutes later, smiling. "Makoto will see us later. He is engaged in an amusing case right now."

I pulled out of the parking area and headed back to the highway. "Amusing in what way?"

Ueki opened a new pack of Cherry cigarettes. "Some automobile owner has complained that a garage mechanic offered to provide him with a safety inspection sticker without checking his car—for only ten thousand yen."

"I don't see why anyone would find that amusing." The car inspections, required by law every two years, are all-systems checks, which are lengthy and expensive. Driving without a dated sticker is a major offense.

Ueki cupped his hands around his hundred-yen butane lighter and lit up. "I only meant that it is interesting to see what simple cases are involved here away from the big cities." He flipped ashes out the window. "Incidentally, I wonder what Hideki Kato will say about this? It is my understanding that he is an

expert automobile mechanic himself."

"That's fine, Toshihiko," I said, "but right now your cousin's opinions aren't as important as directions. Which way to the village?"

To the west, beyond the village, was Mount Daisen, from whose peak, I was told, one could see almost to the Sea of Japan. It seemed to be bathed in green and amber glory on that cloudless day. Following Ueki's directions, we soon arrived at the Kato home, which, to my eyes, was a relic of old Japan, a huge wood building with planked roofing overgrown with brown moss and a scattering of weeds.

Three men dressed in well-worn work clothes and heavy rubber boots stood by a tall cryptomeria tree in front of the house, one of them so immense—so physically large—that I heard myself whistle in surprise.

Inspector Ueki laughed. "Yes, Sam, that is the reaction of many people when they first see Masahi Kato. He was once a famous Sumo wrestler. Now, shall we go greet my relatives?"

We bowed, they bowed, and Seiji, Hideki, and Masahi Kato apologized for the wretched ac-

commodations we would have to endure. The three brothers stared at me curiously as I took Noriko's load of parcels and carried them for her.

The hardwood flooring of the entranceway stood a good meter above the concrete slab of the outer chamber, and following the example of the brothers, I propped myself up, kicked off my shoes, and swung my feet up to the floor, then helped Noriko.

Seiji, who was about fifty, with a face lined and tanned by wind and sun, slid open the *shoji* leading to a back room and called out. "Oi, Yumiko." Hey, Yumiko. "Our guests are here, Granny. How about some sake?"

The old woman who shuffled in ignored everyone else, staring first at my red hair, looking briefly at my blue eyes, then glancing over the rest of a frame that extends almost two meters. "Anno ne," she chuckled, "*kare wa gaijin desu, honto ni.*" Well, *he's* a foreigner, that's for sure.

The three brothers looked embarrassed, and Inspector Ueki quickly spoke to Yumiko. "This is Sam Brent, Granny. He is the husband of Noriko."

She inspected me again, and for the first time in my life, I

felt that I understood the phrase "gimlet-eyed." Then, still laughing, she took me by my shirt sleeve and led me to a cushion by the short-legged table in the center of a spacious tatami mat room. "No matter where he's from, he looks like he can handle his sake." She ambled off to the kitchen, addressing a stream of comments to herself.

Masahi Kato, the former Sumo, sat down across from me. "I am sorry, but Yumiko has lived so many years she feels free to do or say whatever she pleases." Then, suddenly, his face turned crimson and he looked down at the straw matting. "Excuse me, but I am assuming that our guest speaks Japanese."

"No problem, Kato-san," I assured him, "I can manage the language unless you get fancy, and there's no need to apologize for Yumiko. Grandmothers have a special place in my country, too."

That, plus the spicy hot sake, did the trick. Noriko and Mrs. Ueki insisted on helping Yumiko prepare the evening meal, and I gorged myself on sashimi, tempura-style lotus root and chicken, and a green salad topped with sliced cucumber.

Later that night, Yumiko led

me outside to the wood bath house and handed me a towel and a new bar of Cow soap. "Tell me, young man, you do know how to take a proper Japanese bath, don't you?"

When I walked back to the house after a leisurely soak, a new moon was already high in the sky, a silvery smile on a peaceful night's face. Stretching out by Noriko's side on the clean, downy *futon*, I decided I didn't have a worry in the world.

I awakened to an insistent tugging on my kimono, and opened my eyes to the sight of Yumiko tapping her foot impatiently. "If you want breakfast, you can't lounge on your *futon* all day."

My watch informed me that it was five thirty, and I grudgingly following Yumiko to the kitchen, where the others were eating. We nodded at each other sleepily, and Yumiko handed me a plate of *nori* and a raw egg. I broke it and poured the contents over the shiny green wafers of pressed seaweed, stirring it with my chopsticks. By the time I was ready for a second helping, someone opened the entranceway door and called out. "*Gomen, kudasai.*" Excuse me, please. Seiji went to see who it was and came back with

a short, powerfully-built man whose hair was burred almost to the scalp.

Inspector Ueki, smiling, stood up and went to greet the man, then introduced him. "This is my old school friend, Sergeant Makoto Suzuki. Will you share breakfast with us, Makoto?"

"No, thank you," the officer said. After greetings were exchanged, Sergeant Suzuki asked Ueki if he would be able to go to Daisen with him for a while. "The matter I spoke to you about has become more complicated."

Inspector Ueki's enthusiasm was obvious to me. "Naturally, I have time for an old friend."

At that moment, Hideki Kato got up abruptly. "*Nan ji desuka?* What time is it?"

Suzuki checked his watch. "*Roku ji desu.*" Six o'clock.

Hideki jammed on his cap. "I have much work to do today." He rushed from the house, and, as the inspector and Suzuki made their own departure, I heard the cough of Hideki's motorcycle, then the fading roar as he sped toward Daisen. Saturday is a normal work day in Japan, and I thought nothing of it.

"Well," I said to no one in particular, "what can we do today to stay out of everyone's way?"

Seiji, I knew, would be busy most of the day, preparing the small rice paddy and the family garden.

Masahi Kato, holding a tea-cup in his hands, looked up shyly. "Today, Bulentu-san, I will go to Seven-Peak Mountain to make some sketches. It may be that you and our other guests would like to accompany me."

"Oh, Sam," Noriko said, "I would love to go. It has been many years since I saw the countryside."

"Great. How about you, Hanako? Would you and Yumiko care to come with us?"

Mrs. Ueki declined. "I will wait for my husband."

"As for me," Yumiko said, "there's work to be done around the house, and my old bones don't take to tramping through the fields any more."

Noriko went to fix a lunch, and I used the time to shave and comb my hair.

We sat at the edge of a pool formed by a three-forked waterfall, watching the morning sunlight catch the fine droplets in a dazzling display. Masahi Kato, crosslegged on the ground with paper and brush in hand, resembled a serene buddha, and

somewhere beyond the thick stand of bamboo, we heard the call of a bird.

No one felt the need to speak, and I watched in fascination as Masahi tried to capture the essence of falling water in simple, clean strokes. As the sun's warmth increased, driving away the last of the morning chill, he unselfconsciously opened his shirt, and I saw the great layers of muscle now gone soft, the folds around his barrel chest merging with the mound of stomach, contrasting oddly with the feather-light handling of the ink brush. The Japanese are like that—no one thinks twice of a physically strong person's also being a skilled poet or artist. Noriko once tried to explain to me that the Japanese desire to feel oneness with nature is part of a sensitive person's *haifu*, his innermost heart. It is the distinctive mark of character and self-achievement.

Noriko asked me to walk with her, toward the foot of Seven-Peak Mountain, and we followed one of the small streams leading away from the basin. Noriko was delighted with the spring flowers, yellow rape, violets, and early poppies, and, in protected nooks by the stream bank, we could see the

shifting ripples where nervous minnows schooled.

Toward noon, with the sun almost directly above the mountain, we decided to go back and have lunch with Masahi. At the stand of bamboo, Inspector Ueki was waiting for us, an agitated expression on his face.

"Sam. Noriko. I regret that I must inject a sour note on such a perfect day, but there is something I must tell you."

We moved away from the bamboo to a patch of dry ground and sat down. Ueki put out a cigarette and placed it under a rock. "Do you recall what I said about the alleged attempt to accept money in place of a legal car inspection?"

"Hai," Noriko said.

"Well, I did not know at the time, but Hideki Kato may be involved. Sergeant Suzuki has told me that Hideki is the chief mechanic at the inspection garage."

"Can't you just give him a warning?" I asked. "After all, there's no proof—or is there?"

The inspector looked up at the mountain. "No, Sam, this is serious. It now appears that Hideki, with the complicity of the garage owner, may have been engaged in this illegal activity for some time. I was quite

wrong to call it an amusing case."

Noriko touched Ueki's arm. "Why, Father?"

"You should know, Noriko, that we do not tolerate unsafe cars—or drivers. Aside from that, this kind of corruption taints other people, spreading until it is checked." I considered Ueki's reasoning valid. Japan, overcrowded with people and vehicles, manages to hold down the number of fatal accidents by rigid licensing tests and the mandatory car inspections. In addition, there is an informal six-month safety check that most drivers have done voluntarily. I asked the inspector what he intended to do.

"Naturally, it will be difficult to find people who will admit to being lawbreakers. I think we must try to discover if Hideki and the garage owner possess large amounts of cash they are unable to account for honestly."

That led me to think of Hideki's rapid departure after breakfast. "You suppose he was in such a hurry to get out because he was suspicious when Sergeant Suzuki came to the house?"

Inspector Ueki considered the question for a moment. "That is possible, but as he knows Suzuki and I are friends, there

may be another explanation. Hideki may have wished to see some of his dishonest customers before the other mechanics arrived for work."

Noriko was shaking her head sadly. "It is such a shame, Father. Masahi, Seiji, and Yumiko are kind and decent people."

"Yes," Ueki said, "that is a large part of the whole unpleasant situation."

There was nothing to be done for the time being, so we walked back to the pool by the waterfall. Masahi Kato was seated in the same spot, brush poised over inkpot.

Late that afternoon, my usual spring cold began with a bout of sneezing and sniffing, so I excused myself from the trip to Daisen planned by the Uekis, Noriko, Seiji, and Masahi, unpacking the supply of remedies Noriko always selected for me.

Yumiko also stayed behind, eyeing my collection of pills and syrups with suspicion.

"*Dame*," she said with contempt, brushing them aside. Useless. "I will prepare the best medicine for your cold."

Mountain herbs. Ground ox-horn powder? "Uh, Yumiko, I'm not sure . . ."

"None of you young people knows anything," she snorted. "That trash you put in your stomach will do more harm than good. Lie down for a while, and wait for me."

A quarter of an hour later, while I was making continued inroads on a box of tissues, she returned with a steaming bowl on a lacquered red tray.

"Eat," she demanded, taking a guardian stance by the bedding.

"Chicken soup?" It shouldn't have surprised me; many Japanese believe in its curative powers, and it's impossible to watch TV without seeing at least a half dozen commercials with some artist's concept of a cute hen.

"What's so strange, young man?" she said. "Don't *Americajin* know about chicken soup yet?"

I smiled. "Yes, some of us do," I said.

Psychological or otherwise, it helped, bringing out fine beads of perspiration and opening the nasal passages. Yumiko, who waited until the last drop was gone, nodded knowingly. "Yumiko may be old, but you don't live to be eighty without learning a few things. Now, some of my friends are coming over to work with me. You may watch,

if you care to."

"What kind of work?"

She placed the empty bowl on the tray. "We make things to sell in town. Come, I'll explain when they get here."

She left the tray in the kitchen and led me to a back room, the one with a recessed hearth in the floor. During the cold months, the family gathered around a charcoal fire in a bronze brazier, pulling a heavy quilt up to their waists. The quilt was gone now, and the brazier was filled with river sand.

"What do you do with that, Yumiko?"

She picked up a *kiseru* from the edge of the hearth and put a cigarette in the tiny bowl of the long, bamboo-stemmed pipe. "At my age," she said, striking a match, "I only smoke two or three a day, and just a few puffs at a time." She demonstrated, putting the remainder of the cigarette in the sand. "Good for later," she explained.

The more we talked, the closer I felt to her. Her brusque mannerisms, which included the informal and colorful speech of farming and fishing villages, was refreshing after my long stints of trying to get the right shades of politeness and the subtle nuances of "might,"

"will," and "may" that permeate Japanese grammar.

Within the hour, three other women arrived, all about Yumiko's age and all wearing full, ankle-length skirts, blouses of rough cotton, and kerchiefs over their hair. After the bowing, they put down their baskets of dried mountain plants and began weaving sandals, basket hats, backpacks, and the ancient style of straw raincoats.

I was genuinely impressed, and said so. This resulted in a shower of gifts, profuse thanks, laughing apologies for the crude quality of the work, and then Yumiko's suggestion for some entertainment.

"Kumi," she said to one of the women, "why don't you play the samisen for us?"

The three-stringed, banjo-like instrument was brought from a wall closet, and the elderly ladies began to sing, two of them chanting a refrain in one key while a third provided counterpoint in another. It was a type of music I rarely heard in Okayama, and I was totally absorbed in the intertwining of melodies when the meaning of the words dawned on me, drawing a curtain of red over my face.

The lyrics were beyond the merely ribald, dealing with some

highly apocryphal behavioral attributes of Old Queen Cleopatra. I was squirming on my cushion when I heard my car and the Katos' three-wheeled farm truck returning from town. Excusing myself, I went outside.

Inspector Ueki got out of the car first, beckoning for me to follow him away from the house.

"Sam," he said, "the owner of the garage where Hideki works was found murdered at his home today, along with his wife."

"How?" I watched as Mrs. Ueki, Noriko, Seiji, and Masahi entered the house.

"Both of them were stabbed."

There was only one logical question. "Hideki?"

"I saw Sergeant Suzuki while the others were at a Chinese restaurant." Ueki placed a cigarette between his lips without lighting it. "Hideki and the other mechanics were questioned, and Hideki has an alibi." Ueki tried unsuccessfully to work his lighter, then began searching for matches. "Hideki has a girlfriend, and the young woman maintains that he was with her most of the morning. The garage does not open until ten o'clock, and the man who delivers milk to the owner's home said he saw both of them alive an hour or so before that."

"Toshihiko, when Hideki left here in such a rush this morning he hinted that he was going to work."

"Yes," Ueki said, rubbing his hands against the bark of a gnarled pine. "I think the woman is lying, too. It is my opinion that Hideki was alarmed by Sergeant Suzuki's visit, after all, and killed the man and his wife to eliminate the only other people with direct knowledge of the car inspection racket and its extent."

A chill wind was blowing down from the mountains, and I began to sneeze again. "Where's Hideki now?"

Inspector Ueki removed a handkerchief from his pocket and gave it to me. "With the girl, I believe. His brothers say he often spends the night in town."

"He's got to be arrested, Toshihiko."

"It is only a question of time, Sam, before we find proof. Shall we go in before you catch pneumonia?"

I explained the situation to Noriko, who was sitting next to me as I consumed another offering of chicken soup.

"Sam, I am so sad. The rest of the family will suffer horribly if Hideki is a murderer as

well as corrupt."

It was no overstatement; the entire family would have to bear the burden of disgrace, regardless of which individual was personally guilty.

To ease Noriko's depression, I told her about the naughty samisen songs. She explained that some of the lyrics dated back to the rollicking days of the early seventeenth century, when many women entertainers came from the ranks of street walkers during a booming period of city-building.

At the moment, it wasn't very funny. Lying in the dark, neither of us slept for a long time.

I awakened before sunrise, still tired but gratified that my cold was better. When I went to the kitchen, Yumiko and Masahi were already there, drinking breakfast tea.

Masahi stood up, bowed, and wished me a good morning. "If you wish, Bulentu-san, you may come with me to the temple on the mountain this morning."

"Thanks, Kato-san, the fresh air might do me some good."

We finished breakfast and asked Yumiko to tell the others we would be back in a few hours. Outside, stars were still visible in all but the eastern

segment of the horizon, and walking behind Masahi, I was glad he knew the way so well.

Instead of Seven-Peak Mountain, we went to a smaller one, and, by the time the sky lightened enough to show our surroundings, I saw that the gentle grade we were walking up was surrounded by trees. The pine branches higher up looked pagoda-like against the pinkish band of dawn, and we soon saw the temple. When we had gone by the kitchen and sleeping quarters for the priests, we walked onto a narrow raised platform with a thatched roof but no walls until we reached the main building, where morning prayers were being sung.

Once inside, I realized that the temple was dedicated to Kannon, and stood back as Masahi paid reverence before the huge bronze statue of the Goddess of Mercy. Hands clasped in front of him, Masahi finally backed away, and we left the temple, passing the vast courtyard where archery practice was held.

Beyond the courtyard was a still pond, mirror-bright as it reflected the first rays of sunlight. We sat on a wood bench near a willow tree, watching fat carp swimming lazily near the

end of the pond.

Masahi spoke first. "Do you know much about Kannon, Bulentu-san?"

"Only that she represents the love and compassion of Buddha."

He was silent for a moment, then spoke so softly I strained to hear. "Yes, compassion and love. I believe very much in what Kannon teaches, Bulentu-san, and that is why I respectfully ask this question. Is Hideki in trouble? I sense that he is, and it is my duty to help if I can."

I didn't want to lie, but didn't know the entire truth yet. "He may be in trouble, Kato-san, but we may be mistaken, so please don't say anything yet."

Masahi bowed his head. "Hideki was always the wild one. He never married because he said he did not wish to be tied down by family responsibilities."

Trying not to be obtrusive, I asked about Masahi's other brother.

"Seiji is a widower, and still honors his wife's memory. As for myself, I knew a young girl once whom I wanted to marry, but thought it would be wrong."

"But why? Seems to me Sumo wrestlers earn enough to raise a family comfortably."

Masahi looked up, smiling, and slapped his chest. "Sumo wrestlers, Bulentu-san, may live in glory while they are young, but our bodies are so huge that we do not live as long as other men." He turned his eyes toward Seven-Peak Mountain where the rising sun sent shafts of light between the peaks, giving them, for the moment, the appearance of crenellated castle towers. "I am nearing fifty years of age, and give thanks for living as long as I have."

Although I felt that I understood Masahi, it was still difficult to reconcile the sight of this gentle giant, seated so calmly by a temple pond, with the image of a muscular youth, clad in loincloth, bowing and showing his empty hands to his opponent, and then throwing himself like a Juggernaut of muscle and bone against another Sumo until one of them was defeated.

By unspoken consent, we got up and began our descent from the temple grounds.

Hideki Kato returned from Daisen in the early afternoon, reeling drunk, and smirked at Inspector Ueki. "Caught any dangerous criminals today, inspector?"

"In time, Kato-san, in time."

Ueki returned to his perusal of the newspaper. Masahi Kato stared at his brother as Hideki staggered away to his room, slamming the *shoji* behind him.

Noriko and I were getting ready for a stroll through the village when a police car drove up. It was Sergeant Makoto Suzuki, and we went outside with Ueki to talk to him.

"Toshihiko," the Daisen officer said, "there are urgent matters to be resolved immediately."

Ueki took off an outdoor slipper and shook some gravel out. "Is there more evidence?"

"Yes," Suzuki said. "We searched the apartment of Hideki's girlfriend and found almost two million yen, along with this." He pulled the paper wrapping away from a cardboard box. Inside we saw a long kitchen carving knife. "There are stains on it," Suzuki said, "and I am confident the laboratory tests will establish that they are blood from the two victims."

Noriko gasped and put her hand to her mouth. "Oh, this will destroy the family, Suzuki-san."

The sergeant's face showed understanding, but his voice was firm. "There is nothing I

can do. Hideki's woman has made a full confession to save herself. Hideki told her everything, including the names of the people who paid for the phony inspection stickers. I regret that Hideki Kato's arrest will be only one of many."

We walked toward the house with Suzuki. Masahi Kato was standing by the sliding door that led from the entranceway, arms outstretched. "Before you enter, Suzuki-san, please do me the courtesy of explaining."

Out of deference for Ueki's family relationship with the Katos, I suspected, Suzuki complied, reciting the facts, then expressing sorrow at the necessity for the arrest.

Masahi lowered his arms. "I ask you this favor. Before you take Hideki, I would like to be alone with my brothers and Yumiko for a while."

Suzuki was hesitant. "I do not know if I can permit that."

Masahi spoke calmly. "I will not try to prevent you from doing your official duty, Suzuki-san, but I give you my word of honor as a Sumo that I will not allow Hideki to escape."

Suzuki looked at Inspector Ueki. "Would you agree?"

"This is your case," Ueki said, "but I see no objection provided

that we are nearby."

"Very well," Suzuki consented. "I will allow you a half hour, but no more."

"*Hai, wakarimashita,*" the big man said. Understood, sir. "But, please, grant us privacy for these moments."

Noriko went to get her mother, and we assembled by the cryptomeria tree. As we waited, lightning-shot black clouds began swirling over the mountains, driven toward us by a cold wind from the Sea of Japan to the north. When the first drops of rain spattered around us, we ran for the shelter of the house's outer chamber. The wind shook the branches of the trees violently, and I thought I could hear the groan of old timbers as the storm vented itself against the house.

Then, almost as quickly as it began, the squall abated. Only the dripping of waters from the eaves was audible.

Inspector Ueki seemed unaccountably nervous. "It has been almost a half hour," he said, looking at his watch. "I would strongly suggest that the time has come for you to carry out your duty, Makoto."

"*Hai.*" Suzuki entered the house, and I was trying to think of a way to avoid witnessing the actual arrest when the ser-

geant shouted hoarsely. "*Isoide, kudasai!*" Please hurry!

Ueki and I were only steps apart as we made our way in. Suzuki was leaning against a wall, his face drained of color. He pointed to the hearth room, and we hurried through the open doorway, then halted abruptly. Hideki and Seiji Kato were both there, lying on the tatami matting. I didn't have to get any closer to tell that their necks were broken—or whose powerful hands were responsible.

"Yumiko!" the inspector yelled. Some of the paper panels ripped as he forcefully slammed back the sliding *shoji* to her room. She was on her *futon*, head cradled in a folding wood pillow. Ueki pointed to the steady rise and fall of her chest, and we went to inform Suzuki, who was going through the rest of the house, revolver in hand.

"Masahi is not here," the sergeant said, "and I think he fled by the rear entrance."

I thought I knew where we would find him, and told them.

"Yes," Ueki said, "we will go there and look." He reached out and touched Suzuki's weapon. "There is no need for that, Makoto. Masahi Kato will do us no harm."

Ueki asked Noriko and his

wife to remain with the old woman, and we set out toward Seven-Peak Mountain. When we reached the waterfall, we saw Masahi Kato sitting on a flat rock, back against a tree and chin drooping toward his chest.

"*Nete imasu!*" Suzuki said, a note of incredulity in his voice. He is asleep.

Ueki approached the Sumo. "*Ie, nete imasen.*" No, he is not sleeping. The inspector brushed his hand downward over Masahi Kato's face, closing the eyes for the last time.

Suzuki ran his fingers through his stubbly hair. "I am perplexed, Toshihiko. I see no marks on his body."

Ueki turned to face the mountain. "You will find, I believe, that his heart simply stopped. Masahi was, as you know, an old man for a Sumo."

On this occasion, I required no explanations. However the law might regard his actions, Masahi Kato acted out of pity when he took the lives of his brothers, preferring to send them to their deaths at his own hands rather than have one live in sorrow while the other died disgracefully with his neck in a rope. Yumiko? I was convinced that Masahi spared her in the knowledge that she pos-

sessed a special strength of spirit, tempered by long life, and because old age would soon accomplish naturally what he did for his brothers.

"What did you say, Sam?" Toshihiko was standing by my side.

"I was wondering if Masahi willed his own death, or died of shock."

The inspector glanced down at the body. "One can almost see the compassionate hand of Kannon leading him away."

The three of us carried Masahi's body back to the house.

Yumiko looked at me, then back at Noriko. "Why would you want an old woman to come live in your home?"

Noriko was kneeling before Yumiko, hands respectfully flat against her knees. "If it would not displease you, Yumiko-san, you could be of great help to us."

"Eh? How could that be?" The tears were gone, but her eyes were still clouded with grief.

Noriko touched the soft distension of her belly. "It is not long, Yumiko-san, before the baby will be here. I hoped, perhaps, if it were not an imposition . . ."

"So!" Yumiko said. "You want

a nanny, do you? Well, after seeing how helpless men can be, I suppose I could be of some service, if your husband doesn't object."

"Me? Not at all. As Noriko says, it'll be nice to have someone around to lend a hand."

"*Daijobu*," Yumiko said. All right. "At least I'll see that you have chicken soup when you need it."

I would have hugged her, but knew I'd get a thump on the head in return.

I drove Ueki to town, where he made arrangements for the funerals and closing up the house. I asked what he thought of Yumiko living with us.

"I quite agree with Yumiko, Sam. You do need all the help you can obtain."

On the day the first cherry blossoms opened to white, pink, and crimson glory, I called Goto-san and Miss Namba to my office just before closing time.

"I've made some decisions about this year's bonus," I announced.

Neither of them commented, and I continued. "The men will receive the, ah, secret bonus. But the women, Miss Namba, can't be given the same one. It's against tradition, you know."

She didn't quite succeed in masking her disappointment. I picked up a pencil and doodled on a pad of paper. "Therefore, Miss Namba, I've decided to pay a Lovely Ladies' Bonus."

"*Domo*," she gushed, "*domo arigato gozaimashita*." That's the biggest kind of thank you in Japanese.

"But, Bulentu-san," Goto said after Miss Namba left to spread the good news, "some of the women may be disappointed if their appearances make it impossible for them to receive the extra bonus."

"In my opinion, Goto-san, every woman who works with us is beautiful."

Goto hissed admiringly. "Bulentu-san, you truly have the wisdom of a Sour Man." He excused himself and left.

I glanced over at Inspector Ueki, who seemed to be having a coughing fit. "What in the world did he mean, Toshihiko? Sour Man?"

Ueki took his jacket down from the coat rack. "What Goto-san was trying to pronounce, Sam, was Solomon." He held the door open for me. "In this case, I agree. Now, I will allow you to drive me home."

We stopped to admire the blossoming trees outside, then went home to our families.

UNSOLVED

by C. R. Wylie, Jr.

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the November issue.

Bill Bianchi was shot to death at close range on a lonely country road late one night. The police soon established that the murder was committed by one of four men, Al, Jack, Joe, and Tom, and that the gun that was used belonged to one of the four. Each man was questioned and made the statements listed below, two and only two of which are true in each case.

Al: I didn't do it. T
Tom did it. F
Sure I own a gun. T
Joe and I were playing poker when Bill was shot. F

Jack: I didn't do it. T
Al did it. F
Joe and I were at the movies when Bill was shot. F
Bill was shot with Joe's gun. T

Joe: I was asleep when Bill was shot. F
Al lied when he said Tom killed Bill. T
Jack is the only one of us who owns a gun. F
Tom and Bill were pals. T

Tom: I never fired a gun in my life. F
I don't know who did it. T
Joe doesn't own a gun. F
I never saw Bill until they showed me the body. T

Who killed Bianchi?

Taken from 101 Puzzles in Thought and Logic by C. R. Wylie, Jr., © 1957 by Dover Publications, Inc., New York, N.Y.

See page 76 for the solution to the Mid-September puzzle.

MYSTERY CLASSIC

THE HOUNDS OF FATE by Saki

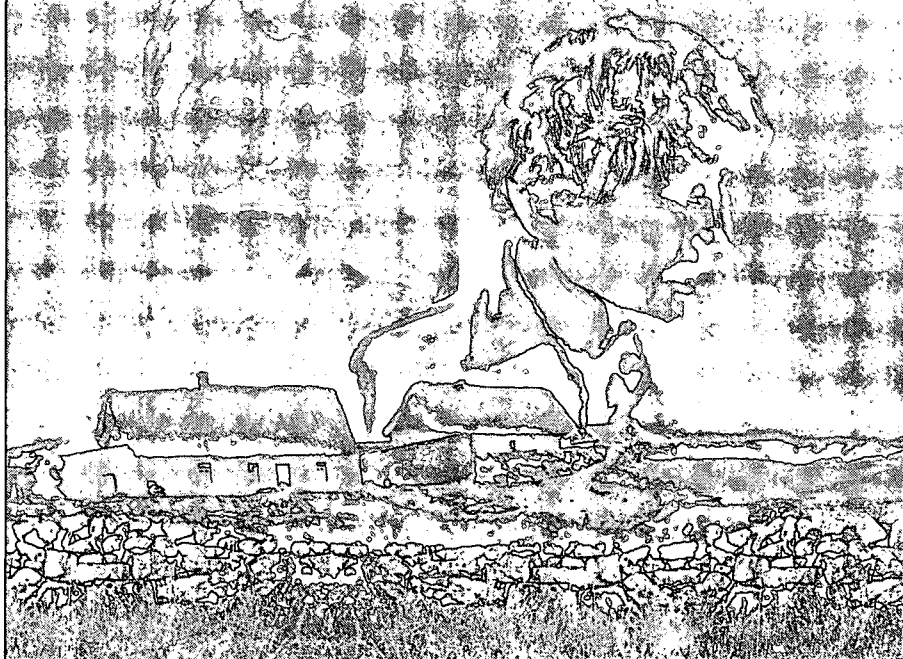
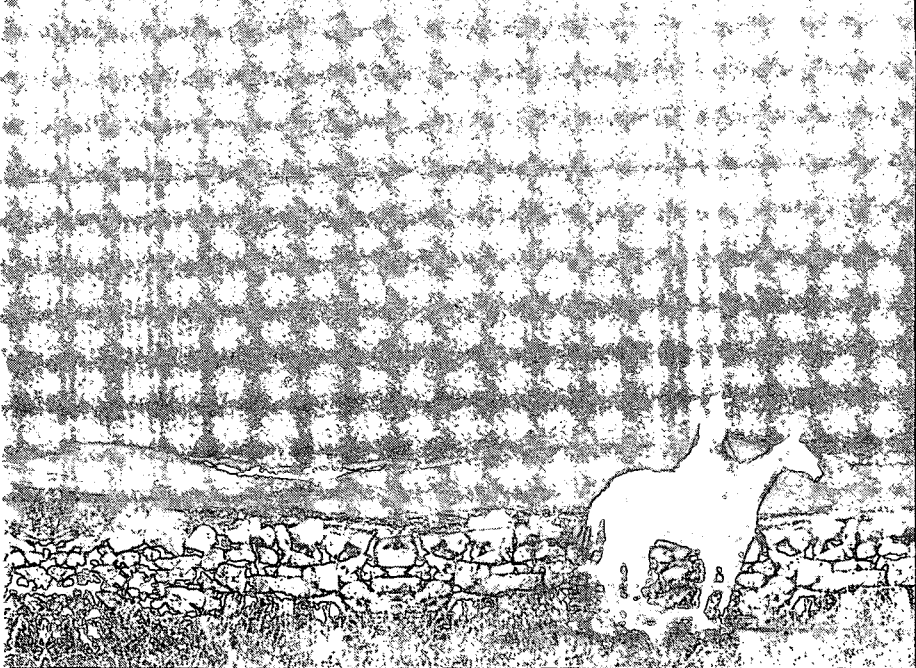


Illustration by Vicky Maggio

In the fading light of a close dull autumn afternoon Martin Stoner plodded his way along muddy lanes and rut-seamed cart tracks that led he knew not exactly whither. Somewhere in front of him, he fancied, lay the sea, and towards the sea his footsteps seemed persistently turning; why he was struggling wearily forward to that goal he could scarcely have explained, unless he was possessed by the same instinct that turns a hard-pressed stag cliffward in its last extremity. In his case the hounds of Fate were certainly pressing him with unrelenting insistence; hunger, fatigue, and despairing hopelessness had numbed his brain, and he could scarcely summon sufficient energy to wonder what underlying impulse was driving him onward. Stoner was one

*"The Hounds of Fate" from the book THE COMPLETE WORKS OF SAKI
by H. H. Munro. Published by Doubleday & Company, Inc.*



of those unfortunate individuals who seem to have tried everything; a natural slothfulness and improvidence had always intervened to blight any chance of even moderate success, and now he was at the end of his tether, and there was nothing more to try. Desperation had not awakened in him any dormant reserve of energy; on the contrary, a mental torpor grew up round the crisis of his fortunes. With the clothes he stood up in, a halfpenny in his pocket, and no single friend or acquaintance to turn to, with no prospect either of a bed for the night or a meal for the morrow, Martin Stoner trudged stolidly forward, between moist hedgerows and beneath dripping trees, his mind almost a blank, except that he was subconsciously aware that somewhere in front of him lay the sea. Another consciousness obtruded itself now and then—the knowledge that he was miserably hungry. Presently he came to a halt by an open gateway that led into a spacious and rather neglected farm-garden; there was little sign of life about, and the farmhouse at the farther end of the garden looked chill and inhospitable. A drizzling rain, however, was setting in, and Stoner thought that here perhaps he might obtain a few minutes' shelter and buy a glass of milk with his last remaining coin. He turned slowly and wearily into the garden and followed a narrow, flagged path up to a side door. Before he had time to knock, the door opened and a bent, withered-looking man stood aside in the doorway as though to let him pass in.

"Could I come in out of the rain?" Stoner began, but the old man interrupted him.

"Come in, Master Tom. I knew you would come back one of these days."

Stoner lurched across the threshold and stood staring uncomprehendingly at the other.

"Sit down while I put you out a bit of supper," said the old man with quavering eagerness. Stoner's legs gave way from very weariness, and he sank inertly into the armchair that had been pushed up to him. In another minute he was devouring the cold meat, cheese, and bread that had been placed on the table at his side.

"You're little changed these four years," went on the old man, in a voice that sounded to Stoner as something in a dream, far away and inconsequent; "but you'll find us a deal changed, you will. There's no one about the place same as when you left; nought but me and your old aunt. I'll go and tell her that you've come; she won't be seeing you, but she'll let you stay right enough. She always

did say if you was to come back you should stay, but she'd never set eyes on you or speak to you again."

The old man placed a mug of beer on the table in front of Stoner and then hobbled away down a long passage. The drizzle of rain had changed to a furious lashing downpour, which beat violently against door and windows. The wanderer thought with a shudder of what the seashore must look like under this drenching rainfall, with night beating down on all sides. He finished the food and beer and sat numbly waiting for the return of his strange host. As the minutes ticked by on the grandfather clock in the corner a new hope began to flicker and grow in the young man's mind; it was merely the expansion of his former craving for food and a few minutes' rest into a longing to find a night's shelter under this seemingly hospitable roof. A clattering of footsteps down the passage heralded the old farm servant's return.

"The old missus won't see you, Master Tom, but she says you are to stay. 'Tis right enough, seeing the farm will be yours when she be put under earth. I've had a fire lit in your room, Master Tom, and the maids has put fresh sheets onto the bed. You'll find nought changed up there. Maybe you'm tired and would like to go there now."

Without a word Martin Stoner rose heavily to his feet and followed his ministering angel along a passage, up a short creaking stair, along another passage, and into a large room lit with a cheerfully blazing fire. There was but little furniture, plain, old fashioned, and good of its kind; a stuffed squirrel in a case and a wall calendar of four years ago were about the only symptoms of decoration. But Stoner had eyes for little else than the bed, and could scarce wait to tear his clothes off him before rolling in a luxury of weariness into its comfortable depths. The hounds of Fate seemed to have checked for a brief moment.

In the cold light of morning Stoner laughed mirthlessly as he slowly realized the position in which he found himself. Perhaps he might snatch a bit of breakfast on the strength of his likeness to this other missing ne'er-do-well, and get safely away before anyone discovered the fraud that had been thrust on him. In the room downstairs he found the bent old man ready with a dish of bacon and fried eggs for "Master Tom's" breakfast, while a hard-faced elderly maid brought in a teapot and poured him out a cup of tea. As he sat at the table a small spaniel came up and made friendly advances.

"'Tis old Bowker's pup," explained the old man, whom the hard-faced maid had addressed as George. "She was main fond of you; never seemed the same after you went away to Australee. She died 'bout a year ago. 'Tis her pup."

Stoner found it difficult to regret her decease; as a witness for identification she would have left something to be desired.

"You'll go for a ride, Master Tom?" was the next startling proposition that came from the old man. "We've a nice little roan cob that goes well in saddle. Old Biddy is getting a bit up in years, though 'er goes well still, but I'll have the little roan saddled and brought round to door."

"I've got no riding things," stammered the castaway, almost laughing as he looked down at his one suit of well-worn clothes.

"Master Tom," said the old man earnestly, almost with an offended air, "all your things is just as you left them. A bit of airing before the fire an' they'll be all right. 'Twill be a bit of a distraction like, a little riding and wild-fowling now and agen. You'll find the folk around here has hard and bitter minds towards you. They hasn't forgotten nor forgiven. No one'll come nigh you, so you'd best get what distraction you can with horse and dog. They'm good company, too."

Old George hobbled away to give his orders, and Stoner, feeling more than ever like one in a dream, went upstairs to inspect "Master Tom's" wardrobe. A ride was one of the pleasures dearest to his heart, and there was some protection against immediate discovery of his imposture in the thought that none of Tom's aforesaid companions was likely to favor him with a close inspection. As the interloper thrust himself into some tolerably well-fitting riding cords he wondered vaguely what manner of misdeed the genuine Tom had committed to set the whole countryside against him. The thud of quick, eager hoofs on damp earth cut short his speculations. The roan cob had been brought up to the side door.

"Talk of beggars on horseback," thought Stoner to himself, as he trotted rapidly along the muddy lanes where he had tramped yesterday as a down-at-heel outcast; and then he flung reflection indolently aside and gave himself up to the pleasure of a smart canter along the turf-grown side of a level stretch of road. At an open gateway he checked his pace to allow two carts to turn into a field. The lads driving the carts found time to give him a prolonged stare, and as he passed on he heard an excited voice call out, "'Tis Tom Prike! I knowed him at once; showing hisself here agen, is he?"

Evidently the likeness which had imposed at close quarters on a doddering old man was good enough to mislead younger eyes at a short distance.

In the course of his ride he met with ample evidence to confirm the statement that local folk had neither forgotten nor forgiven the bygone crime which had come to him as a legacy from the absent Tom. Scowling looks, mutterings, and nudgings greeted him whenever he chanced upon human beings; "Bowker's pup," trotting placidly by his side, seemed the one element of friendliness in a hostile world.

As he dismounted at the side door he caught a fleeting glimpse of a gaunt, elderly woman peering at him from behind the curtain of an upper window. Evidently this was his aunt by adoption.

Over the ample midday meal that stood in readiness for him Stoner was able to review the possibilities of his extraordinary situation. The real Tom, after four years of absence, might suddenly turn up at the farm, or a letter might come from him at any moment. Again, in the character of heir to the farm, the false Tom might be called on to sign documents, which would be an embarrassing predicament. Or a relative might arrive who would not imitate the aunt's attitude of aloofness. All these things would mean ignominious exposure. On the other hand, the alternative was the open sky and the muddy lanes that led down to the sea. The farm offered him, at any rate, a temporary refuge from destitution; farming was one of the many things he had "tried," and he would be able to do a certain amount of work in return for the hospitality to which he was so little entitled.

"Will you have cold pork for your supper," asked the hard-faced maid, as she cleared the table, "or will you have it hotted up?"

"Hot, with onions," said Stoner. It was the only time in his life that he had made a rapid decision. And as he gave the order he knew that he meant to stay.

Stoner kept rigidly to those portions of the house which seemed to have been allotted to him by a tacit treaty of delimitation. When he took part in the farmwork it was as one who worked under orders and never initiated them. Old George, the roan cob, and Bowker's pup were his sole companions in a world that was otherwise frostily silent and hostile. Of the mistress of the farm he saw nothing. Once, when he knew she had gone forth to church, he made a furtive visit to the farm parlor in an endeavor to glean some fragmentary knowledge of the young man whose place he

had usurped, and whose ill-repute he had fastened on himself. There were many photographs hung on the walls, or stuck in prim frames, but the likeness he sought for was not among them. At last, in an album thrust out of sight, he came across what he wanted. There was a whole series, labeled "Tom," a podgy child of three, in a fantastic frock, an awkward boy of about twelve, holding a cricket bat as though he loathed it, a rather good looking youth of eighteen with very smooth, evenly parted hair, and, finally, a young man with a somewhat surly daredevil expression. At this last portrait Stoner looked with particular interest; the likeness to himself was unmistakable.

From the lips of old George, who was garrulous enough on most subjects, he tried again and again to learn something of the nature of the offense which shut him off as a creature to be shunned and hated by his fellow men.

"What do the folk around here say about me?" he asked one day as they were walking home from an outlying field.

The old man shook his head.

"They be bitter agen you, mortal bitter. Ay, 'tis a sad business, a sad business."

And never could he be got to say anything more enlightening.

On a clear frosty evening, a few days before the festival of Christmas, Stoner stood in a corner of the orchard which commanded a wide view of the countryside. Here and there he could see the twinkling dots of lamp or candle glow which told of human homes where the goodwill and jollity of the season held their sway. Behind him lay the grim, silent farmhouse, where no one ever laughed, where even a quarrel would have seemed cheerful. As he turned to look at the long grey front of the gloom-shadowed building, a door opened and old George came hurriedly forth. Stoner heard his adopted name called in a tone of strained anxiety. Instantly he knew that something untoward had happened, and with a quick revulsion of outlook his sanctuary became in his eyes a place of peace and contentment, from which he dreaded to be driven.

"Master Tom," said the old man in a hoarse whisper, "you must slip away quiet from here for a few days. Michael Ley is back in the village, an' he swears to shoot you if he can come across you. He'll do it, too, there's murder in the look of him. Get away under cover of night, 'tis only for a week or so, he won't be here longer."

"But where am I to go?" stammered Stoner, who had caught the infection of the old man's obvious terror.

"Go right away along the coast to Punchford and keep hid there. When Michael's safe gone I'll ride the roan over to the Green Dragon at Punchford; when you see the cob stabled at the Green Dragon 'tis a sign you may come back agen."

"But—" began Stoner hesitatingly.

"'Tis all right for money," said the other; "the old missus agrees you'd best do as I say, and she's given me this."

The old man produced three sovereigns and some odd silver.

Stoner felt more of a cheat than ever as he stole away that night from the back gate of the farm with the old woman's money in his pocket. Old George and Bowker's pup stood watching him a silent farewell from the yard. He could scarcely fancy that he would ever come back, and he felt a throb of compunction for those two humble friends who would wait wistfully for his return. Some day perhaps the real Tom would come back, and there would be wild wonderment among those simple farm folks as to the identity of the shadowy guest they had harbored under their roof. For his own fate he felt no immediate anxiety; three pounds goes but little way in the world when there is nothing behind it, but to a man who has counted his exchequer in pennies it seems a good starting point. Fortune had done him a whimsically kind turn when last he trod these lanes as a hopeless adventurer, and there might yet be a chance of his finding some work and making a fresh start; as he got farther from the farm his spirits rose higher. There was a sense of relief in regaining once more his lost identity and ceasing to be the uneasy ghost of another. He scarcely bothered to speculate about the implacable enemy who had dropped from nowhere into his life; since that life was now behind him one unreal item the more made little difference. For the first time for many months he began to hum a careless lighthearted refrain. Then there stepped out from the shadow of an overhanging oak tree a man with a gun. There was no need to wonder who he might be; the moonlight falling on his white set face revealed a glare of human hate such as Stoner in the ups and downs of his wanderings had never seen before. He sprang aside in a wild effort to break through the hedge that bordered the lane, but the tough branches held him fast. The hounds of Fate had waited for him in those narrow lanes, and this time they were not to be denied.

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Running & Fitness Day, October 9, 1982

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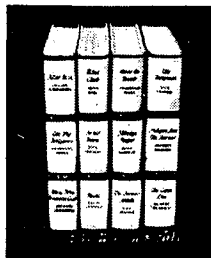
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The day was so long ago, it may be blurred by the years.

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This message is one in a series from America's magazines.

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